The Lost Lamb

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The Lost Lamb

by Theyumenoinu

Summary

"What does he say?"

Shakily standing to join him, Will's gaze wanders from his savior towards the section of trees where the stag had appeared. Yearning, even now, to have it by his side.

"That if I can't find him, he'll come for me."

Notes

My post s03ep13-Wrath of The Lamb fic. It'll be a while before Hannibal returns, so be patient.
Disclaimer: I do not own the show Hannibal or any of the characters.

Chapter 1

The Lost Lamb

Chapter One

“This is all I ever wanted for you, Will. For both of us.”

The plummet from the precipice stretches for what seems like eons. At some point, Will could swear they cease falling altogether—suspended eternally on the cusp of life and death. Neither existing yet somehow alive; everything distant, but oddly tangible.

Will’s world unwinds rapidly. The figure of himself reeling backwards through time to observe how the events of his life unfurled, and finding it rather odd that he’s unable to venture past a specific point. Not minding in the slightest, however, given it’s where he truly begun to live. The stag at his side once again, as he watches himself stir; roused from sleep by a knock on the motel door. Somewhat peeved that someone—most likely, Jack—would seek out his counsel at such an early hour without phoning ahead. And is utterly surprised when he discovers Dr. Lecter standing there instead; haloed by golden rays, and sporting a warm smile that softens the usual tautness of his features.

“Good morning, Will. May I come in?”

Will’s never been entirely fond of permitting people access into his private spaces. Especially, when he’s caught off guard, clad in his sleepwear—the nightmares of his mind still lingering in the shadows.

Hannibal hesitates, as though sensing his uncertainty. “*May* I come in?”

Will swallows uncomfortably against the lump forming in his throat. His anxiety mounting, as he reluctantly turns to gesture the psychiatrist in. Figuring it’ll be considered rude otherwise, and that it’s best to yield rather than fight the inevitable.

The rest of the scene plays out in quick session; that is, until Hannibal glances down and starts, “You know, Will.” As he leans forward, sunlight bathes Hannibal’s profile and shadows frame his angular face; the cool amber and tinted maroon of his eyes glistening spectacularly, unlike Will has ever seen. The very sight captivating him. “I think Uncle Jack sees you as a fragile, little teacup.”

Will’s lips quirk at the absurd analogy, and averts his gaze to the food; waiting patiently for Hannibal to deliver the expected punchline.

“The finest china only to be used for special guests.”

It’s strangely fitting now, all things considered, as Will watches the remainder of his timeline with Hannibal elapse. Comprehending, that he’s the one who’s been whole and broken simultaneously, not unlike that of a shattered teacup. The contents spilling free, no longer confined, while the jagged, splintered fragments are discarded, never to return to its previous condition.

Hannibal's been wrong to yearn for Will’s reformation.

He’s been wrong to perceive the mess merely as a disheartening loss.

It’s never once been about the decorative casing.

Strong arms encircle him protectively, preventing any margin of separation where gravity is concerned. Their rasping breaths lost to the collective roar of the sea and howling upwind.

Dying’s not morbid, Will muses as an eerie sense of calm overcomes him. Feeling nothing but the steady rhythmic beating of Hannibal’s heart against the shell of his ear, the soft brush of lips across his temple. *It’s tragically beautiful…*

We’re beautiful.

~*~

Lucidity returns to him in increments. Vague sensations vying for dominance while he lazily surfaces from the recesses of unconsciousness; disoriented and worryingly numb. There’s a discernibly acrid salty and metallic taste in his mouth, as well as a grainy texture thickly coating his tongue. The pungent combination eliciting him to cough feebly, and grimacing, when white-hot pain flares simultaneously from his cheek and shoulder.

His senses come hurtling back, bursting the bubble of silence that envelopes him as the rushing clamor of the surf, aggravated by the storm, grates against his ears. A frigid wind bites unremittingly at his flesh, causing him to shiver violently, as he belatedly registers the icy rain that impinges unceasingly upon his backside.

It takes tremendous effort, but eventually he manages to slit his eyes open to take in his surroundings—only to be met with an endless void of black. His heart racing at the thought of being blind before a bolt of lightning carves a path across the sky; illuminating the long stretch of rocky beach he's lying prone upon, as well as the bordering line of trees looming merely a few meters upslope.

He has no recollection of anything; who he is, the date, let alone how he ended up here. Racking his brain for answers until his head aches considerably, Will draws a blank; save for the notion that he's lost something significant. Other than his memories, that is. Someone, he thinks, that he desperately needs to find.

Slowly, and against some better judgment, he attempts to rise to all fours, but is halted by searing pain that shoots up his left arm. A scream clawing its way up his throat as he collapses back onto the damp sand, panting heavily. Waiting for another flash of light in order to examine his limb that's twisted unnaturally, and the bloody, fractured bone that's punctured through the skin at his elbow.

Letting out a thin, pathetic cry, he slides his uninjured arm beneath his chest to aid him until he's resting squarely upright on his knees. The effort it takes draining him more of what little energy he has reserved. His eyelids drooping while he fights the fatigue that's tugging at him insistently.

I have to find shelter—find help. I'll die if I stay here. His thoughts are sluggish, muddled. And he feels a certain disconnect from his body once he grudgingly moves to regain his footing, making the trudge from the shoreline to the edge of the woods a grueling peregrination—stumbling and slipping over every natural obstacle that presents itself.

He treks along, battling the elements of the storm and stubborn underbrush until the soles of his shoes hit asphalt. Then, drops to his knees, unable to push his cold, battered body any farther. Not sure how long he kneels there on the road before headlights cut through the suffocating darkness and sheet of rain. The unpleasant screech of tires as the vehicle skids to a jerky stop causing him to flinch, only to release a shaky breath of relief when he finds the grill inches away.

The motorist is lackadaisical departing the safety of the truck, but is hardly apprehensive when he decides to approach him. He's practically blinded by the flood of headlights, but from what he can make out of the man, he's definitely further along in age. His cane clacking as he maneuvers to stand just before him, voice raspy, heavily accented with a southern drawl as he wonders, "Do you often sit in the middle of the road durin' a storm or is this a special occasion?"

Despite himself, he chuckles weakly; his vision beginning to swim in and out of focus. "I'm not sure," his own voice comes out small, almost inaudible. "I can't remember."

There's an amused huff as the man shifts his weight, not seeming to care that he's also drenched from head to toe. "Well, how 'bout you get in the truck before you catch your death out here."

He swallows in response, uncertain if he should place trust in this man, but ultimately shoves the instinct away. Especially, with the fact that he's moments from losing consciousness again, hasn't the slightest clue where he is, and is still in bad shape and possibly on the brink of death.

"Alright," he hears himself say, struggling to stand once more. Grateful for the man's hand gripping his undamaged arm to hold him steady, as he's half-consciously guided to the passenger door, and assisted inside.

Propping his head against the window, he permits himself to slip even further just as the truck starts forward. Appreciating the heaviness and warmth of the blanket that's draped over him seconds before everything fades to black.

~*~

He stands at the edge of a cliff, facing the formidable sea. Observing the waves as they break against the boulders below; white and frothy even in the pale darkness. The surface glistening with cascading moonlight, attributing to its tranquil beauty and imposing force.

It's a strikingly familiar sight, one he feels he needs to recall, but oddly doesn't wish to. Content to stay, yet anxious to leave. Vaguely aware that he's lost something here. Its presence lingering on the wind, in the very soil under his feet—hauntingly so, but he can't turn away, can't forsake it.

"Will." *The voice rises from the cliffside, feathering lightly into his ear. It resonates in the very core of him, luring him closer until he toes the rocky ledge; every fiber of his being aching to hear it once more.*

His attention is drawn from the sea as something catches his eye, and when he glances down, he finds his shoes immersed in a river of black. Flowing over the edge in a steady stream, cascading down into the churning water below.

He startles when a loud exhale emits from directly behind him. The beast's breaths warm against the nape of his neck, forcing him to disregard the liquid in favor of the potential threat at his backside. Astonished, as he comes face-to-face with an impressively large stag; eyes like embers, its pelt glossy and dark as ebony.

Several indeterminable minutes pass; their eyes locked. Then, the creature speaks, eliciting his heart to leap into his throat as he recognizes it as the one he'd heard whispering from the sea.

"Don't retreat within yourself, little lamb." *It takes a daunting step towards him, hooves splashing the dark liquid—blood, he suddenly realizes—droplets staining the cuffs of his pants.* "The wolves are circling—hungry—and you are baring your neck."

The stag softly nuzzles the scruff of his face like an echo of a familiar hand. "Where are you?"

He doesn't know, and he hardly has a chance to reply as the blood suddenly swirls up from beneath him. Consuming every inch of his flesh in black veins, seeping in, and pouring down his throat, cutting him from his air supply.

The stag doesn't react to his suffering. Just indifferently observes as he falls backwards over the ledge; repeating once more with a subtle note of urgency, "Where are you?"

He jolts awake with a gasp; he's afire, fighting to inhale precious oxygen past the blood pooling in his throat. There's a considerable ache in his chest as he hacks violently, which is then followed by more sharp pains and twinges throughout the rest of his body. He's going to die, he thinks grimly, choking on blood.

"Easy now," someone with a southern drawl soothes, placing their remarkably cool hand over the burning flesh of his forehead in an attempt to comfort. "Calm down. Just concentrate on breathin'."

Although panic is clawing at him, he acquiesces—squeezing his eyes shut through another miserable coughing fit. Something snuffles at his ear as he strives to inhale, and begins to feel the fear drain from him when the frantic beating of his heart slows to a rate somewhat closer to normal.

"There," the man says, relieved, running fingers through the curly, sweat-laden tufts of hair sticking against his forehead. "You're very sick. You have a fairly severe case of pneumonia, which is most likely due to a compromised immune system from whatever trauma you've obviously endured. That and kneelin' out in the pourin' rain for God only knows how long."

Slitting his eyes open, he blearily takes in the sight of the elderly man. He's bulky, clad in layers; the outer being an incredibly hideous Christmas sweater with a mildly terrifying snowman face in the center, as though it were knitted by an amateur. His dark hair streaked with strands of grey, highlighting the small balding patch at the top of his skull. Making it apparent that he's taken adequate care of himself throughout the years; still fit, healthy, even despite his old age.

"You're a doctor," he rasps out, wheezing.

The man nods once, smiling warmly. "Was," he amends. "A family physician." He leans over the bed, producing a small pocket light from virtually nowhere, and brutally shines it in his eyes. "Do you remember anythin'? Your name, perhaps?"

He ponders the question for a minute; bits and pieces of the dream resurfacing, breaking through the thick fog inside his mind. "Will."

"Just Will?" The man questions, furrowing his brows. "Nothin' else?"

Another hacking cough is wrenched from him, and Will's thankful for the doctor's patience as he wrestles futilely to breathe—shaking his head in answer.

The bed Will's lying on—not a hospital one, he notes—suddenly dips on his right side as a beautiful golden retriever drags herself closer to his side. Forcing her cold nose beneath his arm—that's hooked to an IV line—in order to bring his hand to rest atop her head. Her tail thumping happily against the mattress as he comprehends and complies, scratching weakly behind her ears.

"She likes you," the doctor chuckles, observing their interaction with interest. "You must be a dog person. They can sense that, y'know?"

When Will doesn't make to reply, the fever gripping him, the doctor takes it upon himself to uphold their meager conversation. "Her name's Benny, after my late son. But as for me, you can call me Jim." He smiles toothily, distantly reminding Will of someone who's missing—someone who has yet to be found. His chest aching at his lapse in memory.

Jim regards him curiously for a minute longer, then reaches for the bedside table; drawing Will's attention away from Benny at the distinct sound of pills rattling against plastic. Watching as Jim leans back and thumbs the cap off the bottle, shaking out a specific dosage onto his palm before offering them to Will.

"Aspirin, for the fever. I've already administered antibiotics through your IV," he elucidates, pressing the pills against Will's chapped lips insistently. "It's better you take these while you're still lucid. The last time, I nearly had to extract them from your throat."

Some distant part of Will doesn't entirely trust the whole situation, but finds he's much too out of it at the moment to question it. Too tired to put up a token protest as the man slips the pills into his mouth, and stares intently until Will's obediently swallowed them down with a sip of water through a straw.

Jim smiles once more, pleased. "There we go. Your temperature should break sometime tonight, don't you worry. You'll be right as rain in no time," he assures, patting Will's head.

Benny must sense Will's increasing desire for sleep, for she wastes no time shifting into a comfortable position; resting her head on his abdomen, while setting a paw protectively atop his leg. The reassuring weight she provides familiar and welcoming as his hand buries into the warm fur at the scruff of her neck, and eases into a dreamless slumber.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The comments, kudos, and bookmarks I received are greatly appreciated! Thanks!

Chapter Two

Will spends several days adrift in conscious limbo and the majority of each night writhing in pain, soaking in a pool of his own perspiration. All the while hallucinating an enormous stag towering above the bed; its broad shoulders bumping the slanted roof of the cabin, antlers shaving thin layers from the low-hanging beams with every turn of its head. Yet, Will has no qualms over its imposed company. Struck with the vague impression that the beast's intentions towards him are harmless. Perceiving it to be more of a silent guardian rather than a foe.

Jim makes to check in on his status periodically. Administering painkillers via IV drip, but only when he deems it necessary due to the adverse effects it seems to have on Will's mental state. Then, decidedly will either leave to busy himself elsewhere or plop down into the chair at Will's bedside for a while; reading to him, and engaging him in one-sided conversation until Will starts drifting off again. And although it's comforting, Will maintains a sense of unease at the stag's mounting aggravation; bristling, as though it were displeased to witness Will under another's care.

When Will finally does attain a firm grasp on reality, he finds himself alone; empty air greeting him where the stag once stood, and no Benny or Jim in sight. Disquieted by the extending silence, he takes in the soft grey light filtering through the crevice of the shades, and wisps of dust circulating midair. His senses alerting to the sharp scent of pine, crisp sea air, and a lingering, muted essence of spice that evokes something within him—whispering a reminder of a home he can't quite recall.

Exhaling heavily, Will brings his hand to scrub tiredly at his face. Noting the pinch of the bandage taped at the crease in his arm where the IV had been inserted, as well as the prickly feel of stitching below his cheekbone where the pads of his fingers graze it. Shifting his head on the pillow, he also inspects the other arm now secured in a stiff, forest green cast. The darkened bruising blooming across his knuckles a sore sight as any, sending his mind spiraling, wondering what he might have done to inflict this kind of karma upon himself. Agitated, to be left with the aftermath of a life that remains frustratingly elusive.

What the hell happened to me?

Groaning, he clumsily sits upright; muscles quivering under the strain, stiff from disuse. The squeaking of bedsprings resounding through the room with each movement until he's accomplished the small, but arduous feat. Not surprised by his debilitation, given he's sustained substantial injuries and has been riddled with illness for days on end.

The room's much too dim to make out any minute details, but from the lack of embellishments along the walls and the minuscule clutter of personal items on top the dresser, he could hazard a guess that the cabin's being utilized as a rental. That or a vacation home of sorts. Either way, it's evident that Jim isn't a local of wherever he is currently. Or possibly, hasn't been one long enough to be labeled an official resident.

Gently removing the duvet from atop his legs, Will carefully maneuvers until his bare feet rest flatly on the chilly, wood flooring. His limbs feeling inordinately heavy as he unsteadily strives to stand, gripping the bedside table in lieu of a handrail until he's attained proper balance. Noticing, how the loungewear he's dressed in hangs baggy over his frame; the cuffs of the loose bottoms pooling at his heels, and waistband dipping low over his hipbones. The thought of Jim changing his clothes while he lay unconscious occurring to him a fraction of a minute later, inducing heat to creep up his neck at the concept of being involuntarily exposed while at some ex-doctor's mercy. Though, he's quick to shake himself of his crippling embarrassment before his imagination could run wild.

Will starts languidly for the door; the floorboards creaking and groaning under his weight. And grits his teeth at the loud squeal that emits from the hinges when he tentatively pushes it open. Relieved, to be met with no resistance upon stepping from the bedroom and out into the hallway that overlooks the quaint—and notably empty—frontal seating area with only a flimsy looking banister preventing him from potentially falling to his death.

Jim's not home. Hasn't been for a while now, he infers, padding down the last stretch of the hall until he meets the leading step of the staircase. And gives a cursory glance at the cracked door of the bathroom directly to his left before carefully descending to the main level. The cabin proving to be fairly smaller than he initially would have believed, finding both the kitchen and seating area have been combined as one large room with the island acting as the divider.

There's a plush dog bed on the floor adjacent to the chesterfield, visibly lumpy from continuous use, as well as a handful of squeak toys strewn across the accenting rug. The pallid grey daylight held at bay by the curtains that remain firmly shut, even despite the hour. Which is midday, he learns, according to the wall clock mounted over the wall behind the standing fireplace; usually about the time people would acknowledge the world.

Other than those specific details and a few pots soaking in the sink, there isn't much left for Will to mentally catalog—the place being as tidy as it is bland. Modern technology, apparently, not deemed a necessity from the surprising absence of a landline and television. Though, probably not due to any deficiency of electricity, given the ceiling fan directly above and rows of overhead lights embedded in the wooden beams. Indicating the cabin's either on the mass grid or runs by its own generators, therefore permitting such luxuries if one desires them.

Will shuffles aimlessly toward the front door. Grunting with annoyance when he turns the handle and the latch bolt sticks stubbornly, forcing him to utilize more of his weight in order to wrench it open. The abrupt motion when the door jerks aggravating the patched up wound at his shoulder, causing him to wince at the pain lancing up his neck. His breath hitching at the brisk autumn breeze that nearly cuts through him, as well as the shock of the equally frigid deck beneath the pads of his feet—toes already numbing from the cold.

It's definitely the type of weather that bids people to tarry a bit longer within the warm confines of their homes. The kind to entice them to bundle in blankets, and sip hot beverages from holiday mugs while indulging in their favorite pastimes. Yet strangely, it doesn't evoke the same nostalgia in him. Instead, the bitter air sparks a desire to venture out and explore what the wilderness has to offer. Seek out what has been lost. Find home somewhere beyond the safety of four walls, one where he's meant to fight to sustain it, side by side with another. And observe the blood spray between them in their conquests—all primal and animalistic.

Will gasps as he floods back into himself, the darkness receding as swiftly as it came. His gaze falling immediately upon the sight of a majestic stag emerging from the veil of molting trees, merely yards down the dirt path leading from the house. Its own stare impassive—unflinching—as though daring him to follow.

But Will doesn't—he *can't*—albeit the reason why eludes him. A dawning sense of sorrow overcoming him while he watches the noble beast patiently wait a moment longer before ambling back into the woodland. His heart plummeting with inexplicable weight at its retreating backside, but realizing shortly after it vanishes that he isn't too concerned over its departure. Knowing with a baffling amount of confidence that it won't be long before it returns again to offer another chance for him to do so.

Settling into one of the lounging chairs on the deck, Will curls his legs to his chest; his toes sheltered in the excess fabric draped around them. And absently teases at the padding inside the cast with his fingers until he hears the distant roar of an engine shifting gears, and distinct crunching of tires rolling across gravel. Jim's maroon truck breaching the mouth of trees bordering the dirt road seconds before Benny's muffled barking reaches him; frantic, upon spotting Will outside, even once Jim eases the vehicle to a stop.

"Boy, what do ya think you're doin' out here?" Jim starts as soon as he swings the door outwards, pulling a paper bag filled with groceries from the seat beside him along with his cane. Hushing Benny, whose unbridled, ecstatic yips and whines only continue to ratchet up in volume.

Will smirks in response, then braces himself for the moment Jim releases Benny. Incapable of containing the weak laugh that spills out when she comes barreling straight for him, nearly knocking Jim to the ground in the process. Her claws scraping against the wood planks of the deck as she bumbles desperately to reach him.

"Whoa, easy, girl," Will chides half-heartedly when Benny attempts to hop into his lap, only managing to catch her claws in the fibers of his sweatshirt. The strain of her weight on his body easily dismissible once she commences accosting his face with affection—twisting and wriggling in his grasp, panting heavily in sheer delight.

Jim's metal cane clacks noisily while he limps his way onto the deck. Huffing a breath that's equal parts exasperation and mild amusement as he perches himself in the chair alongside Will's; propping the grocery bag between his messily laced hiking boots.

"I ain't goin' to treat you kindly if you relapse," Jim grumbles, tersely tugging the hem of his ill-fitted plaid coat until the bunched material smooths to his liking.

Benny—her initial excitement ebbing—decidedly climbs down, and wedges herself between Will's thighs as he repositions himself. Her head tilting upwards in invitation for petting, tongue lolling from the side of her mouth.

Will pats her head absently, his mind racing at the unspoken implication. "I could possibly find someone who might help me get back to wherever I came from—help me remember who I am. Maybe, someone from the local hospital. I would just need a ride there…"

Jim shoots him a sharp look, as though he's wavering on an internal argument of whether or not to take that as a personal offense. "I can tell you right now, son, I've just looked into missin' persons reports while I was in town, and nothin's come up in regards to you." Shifting minutely, Jim makes to pin Will with a hard, earnest stare that only forces him to drop his gaze from him to Benny. "What'll most likely happen is they'll give you a courtesy exam, offer you a brief chat with a mental health specialist, then send you on your way with nothin' more than an insincere, 'good luck'. You think that I'm the type to put you through that, knowingly?"

Will scoffs softly with incredulity. "I don't know what to think. I barely even know your name." He teases Benny's ear between two fingers, noting the rigidity in his hand due to protracted exposure of the cold. "You couldn't even wait for my consent for the sponge bath," he adds a tad bitterly, almost as an afterthought.

A wall of heavy silence descends between them; Will silently berating himself for his ungrateful conduct towards the man that's saved his life. And is on the verge of apologizing when, said man, unexpectedly lapses into a fit of boisterous laughter—throwing his head back from the force of it with tears gathering at the corners of his eyes.

"I think I like you, son," Jim finally manages to say after several failed attempts to speak. Subtly hinting he hadn't anticipated he would. "Your list of priorities leaves somethin' to be desired—so willin' to place your modesty over your own life." Wiping away a rogue tear, he finishes with a chuckle, "You washed yourself, ya goon—not entirely well, I might add. I stood by, of course, just in case you needed assistance, but you ultimately did all the work."

Heat crawls up Will's neck once again, but he's quick to squash his embarrassment. And skillfully dodges more potential humiliation by leaping to question the ex-doctor's healing methods. "How did you obtain the proper medical equipment? Surely, the hospital wouldn't just readily provide you prescriptions and raw materials upon request."

Jim heaves a sigh at that, the humor of the moment draining rapidly from his features. "Still have me on trial, huh? Can't help but start to think you might've been a lawyer." Scratching the whiskers at his chin, he replies matter-of-factly, "I came down with pneumonia a couple weeks back myself. I live a ways from town, so I was granted in-home care. Had some

antibiotics, painkillers, and even a couple IV bags left over. As for your cast and bandages, those are easily attainable. I normally keep those items around as a precautionary measure."

Will considers him for a moment, then nods in comprehension. Shivers wracking him as he releases Benny to wrap his arm around his torso in an attempt to combat the biting wind.

Jim eyes him knowingly, but doesn't make to usher him indoors; conceding some measure of control where Will feels he has none. "You still haven't been able to remember a thing?" he prompts, though it's clear he's already determined the answer.

"No." Will huffs, sullen. "Except…"

"Except?" Jim prods, eyebrows rising expectantly.

"I know I need to remember someone."

"Is it your wife?" Jim suggests, and grunts while he steadily rises to his feet. Indicating his desire to head inside after indulging Will's need for fresh air long enough.

Will ruminates the possibility of there being one, but shakes his head. "It's always a man's voice."

Jim perks up at that, staring down at him with renewed interest. "What does he say?"

Shakily standing to join him, Will's gaze wanders from his savior towards the section of trees where the stag had appeared. Yearning, even now, to have it by his side.

"That if I can't find him, he'll come for me."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the [somewhat] short chapter. I might have a bit longer chapter for next time. Enjoy! And thank you again for the comments and kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Three

The catacombs are dank, silent, and poorly lit by lanterns fitted snugly within carved apertures in the stone walls. Each twist and turn leading Will deeper into the maze. Prompted onwards by a familiar presence, even when the passageways begin to appear iteratively similar—his return route now forever lost to the labyrinth expanding miles behind him.

Pulse pounding against his throat, Will fights against an inexplicable pressure bearing down upon him the farther he travels. Shadows simultaneously inching inwards, seeming to vibrate with sinister energies. Shivering, when his arm brushes lightly against the darkness as though it's consolidated to form a solid black mass that's shockingly icy to the touch.

But his steps never falter. Knowing, somehow, that the man he seeks is somewhere nearby, awaiting his arrival.

It's after a few more tentative turns, and a couple dead ends, that he finally stumbles across a chamber. Blood pooling in a thick layer over the ground, warming his bare pale feet as they plunge into it, submerging him up to an inch above the ankle. And as it sloshes against his skin, Will's attention is drawn to his peculiar state of undress; merely clothed in a plain white shirt and charcoal grey boxer shorts. Definitely not the appropriate attire one would wear traipsing through an underground cemetery.

Two leather chairs stand positioned in a face-off, placed only feet apart—their unsullied upholsteries a stark contrast to the rocky, dull background. One of the chairs remaining partly cloaked in shadow having due to a single lantern casting light upon the room. His heart beat slowing to synchronize with an unsourced ticking reverberating from the walls.

"Hello, Will," *a man's voice suddenly emanates from the veil of darkness; the same tone and pitch Will recalls hearing from the stag's mouth.* "You're right on time. Please, sit."

Will, to his own amazement, obliges and immediately heads for the closest chair with little trepidation. The blood lapping around his ankles as he seats himself, gripping the padded armrest tenaciously until his knuckles glow white.

At long last, the man reveals himself; albeit, most of his features remain obscured by darkness. Moving with dignified grace, he settles easily into the opposing chair—interweaving his fingers while he fluidly folds one leg over the other. Will's options of study whittling down to either the bottom fraction of his brown plaid suit jacket or his oddly pristine dress shoes, given it's the only portion of him that's illuminated. Displeased, that he's not granted any more details than that.

"Your thoughts seem to be rather…displaced," *the man observes, forcing a shocked, nervous laugh from Will.* "Do you feel uncomfortable?"

"I think that shouldn't come as a surprise, given the current situation*." Will smiles tautly, digging his nails mercilessly into the leather.*

Will can practically feel the man's head tilt as he questions, "And what situation might that be?"

"What situation—?" *Will repeats incredulously, muttering under his breath as he drops his gaze to his lap; despising how exposed he is.* "I'm underground, my feet are soaking in blood, and I'm apparently having a sort of therapy session with some unusually familiar man." *His eyes flick up to the where the man's face might be, hidden in the shadows.* "Anyone would feel uncomfortable. In fact, anyone in their right mind would believe they've gone insane."

Silence stretches for an indeterminable amount of time, save for the infernal ticking—of which its source is yet to be determined. Will jerking with alarm when the man finally decides to speak. "But you are not."

"No," *Will agrees, swallowing thickly, lowering his gaze.*

Another pause. "Where are we, Will?" *he prompts, gesturing generally at their surroundings.*

"Shouldn't you know?" *Will spits, a sudden, bewildering swell of anger washing over him.* "You're the one who brought me here."

The man exhales heavily, presumably exasperated with Will's perverse nature to play at his own game. "Insolence is unbecoming of you. I'm merely trying to help."

The blood whirlpools sluggishly at Will's feet, and he cringes away from it when the thought arises that he hasn't been unduly bothered by it. It incites him to lift his legs with haste, and rest his feet on the edge of the seat—watching intently as rivers of crimson stream incessantly from the tips of his toes.

"Help me with what?"

"Simply, the truth," *he swiftly answers, clearly unfazed by Will's reaction.* "No matter how deeply we inhume our true nature in our subconscious, it can still be unearthed. And more

often than not, liberates us. Tell me, Will…" *Leather creaks under his weight as he bends forward, halting purposely before gracing the light.* "How much longer can you afford this brazen façade?"

Will's brows furrow in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You can't escape yourself, Will. Neither can you cure what you are by willful dissociation. Of course, erasing oneself could also be an act of deflection." *Reaching out his hand, the man brushes fingertips gently down the side of Will's calf. The touch sending chills up his spine.* "It's not the entirety of your life you desire to lock away, but one memory in particular. And rather chance the possibility of evoking it, you determined it safer to banish it all."

"I can't be whole without you," *the words flow from Will's mouth involuntarily; though, they strangely sting with bitter truth.* "I don't want to live if you're…" *he trails off, clenching his teeth.* "I can survive as I am right now."

A responding morose sigh perforates the heavy silence that follows.

"A butterfly cannot reverse metamorphosis nor can it disguise itself as a fellow caterpillar, for it has wings. Therefore, it should never permit itself to lapse into a false sense of security, as only the truly rarest are sought for collection." *The hand tracing lines across Will's flesh moves to rest atop one of Will's that's gripping his shins, and squeezes it to convey the severity of his message.*

A gasp is startled from him when a new set of hands unexpectedly grasp the sides of his face from behind. Forcing his head to incline until his eyes meet the disturbingly familiar ones of the newcomer. Shocked, when he recognizes the stranger as a duplicate of himself, only drenched entirely in blood, antlers sprouting forth from the top of his skull.

"'In all of us, even in good men, there is a lawless wild-beast nature, which peers out in sleep.'" *Will hears the man quote, but he's incapable of averting his gaze from the piercingly cold, apathetic eyes staring straight through him.* "It's time to wake up, Will."

At those words, Will's doppelgänger wrenches Will's head painfully to bare his neck. His lips parting to reveal pointed teeth before steadily descending upon him, aiming squarely for the jugular. The background ticking increasing in its intensity until Will swears the flesh at his skull begins to split and tear. His scream unrecognizable, even as it reverberates loudly from the dark walls—only to be abruptly silenced when fangs puncture the skin of his throat.

A shrill screech jars Will back to reality in time to experience yet another near heart attack. Aware he's once again kneeling in the middle of the road, watching helplessly as a car skids straight for him; the blare of its high beams robbing him temporarily of sight.

Time slows to a crawl—the universe progressing at a measured pace as his senses narrow to the beating of his heart and his rasping breaths filling his lungs. Feeling a current of air sweep over his side as the vehicle swerves last minute to avoid him; barely a foot of space separating him from an unfortunate fate.

“Jesus,” someone whispers, and only after the world snaps firmly back into place does he comprehend it had been him. The gravity of everything surging upwards until his head spins, causing him to tip forward—palm scraping asphalt as he curls into himself, and violently retches what little contents remain in his stomach.

“Are you all right? Are you hurt?” A woman’s voice calls from a distance seconds before her flashlight shines brutally in his face; stabbing at his eyes, and forcing him to turn his head away, as the throbbing against his temples spikes.

“Fine,” he answers, spitting lingering traces of bile from his mouth. “I’m…I’m fine.” Shakily, he rises to his feet—mainly to prove to himself that he can—and sways imperceptibly in place. His body trembling with ebbing adrenaline.

“What’s your name?” she asks, her tone inflecting authority yet retaining an essence of gentleness. Clearly, trained to err on the side of caution, but not so much to come across as untrustworthy or unhelpful.

Law enforcement, he deduces, raising his only usable hand to shield his eyes against the glare. “Will.”

“Last name?”

He shrugs, hoping he isn’t perceived as uncooperative or defiant.

She, thankfully, doesn’t press him over it, but nevertheless carries on with the standard list of inquiries. “Do you know where you are, Will?”

He turns from the light briefly, blinking at the expansion of darkness engulfing the rural road. “Can’t say that I do.”

Gravel crunches underfoot as she takes a cautious step toward him, her flashlight keeping him partially blind. “You’re in Gloucester County, about a mile north from Dutton.”

“Dutton?” he parrots, unable to place the town.

“Virginia,” she provides helpfully. “Have you taken any drugs or medication tonight?”

“I’m, uh…” Will trails off as a shiver wracks him, his sleepwear inadequate protection against the frigid temperature. “I’m recovering from injuries, so I’ve been taking painkillers. The medication must’ve induced sleepwalking.”

She hums thoughtfully, and instructs him to stay put while she heads back to the car. The pale moonlight illuminating the letters imprinted along its backside, confirming that she is, indeed, a state trooper.

From the direction she’d been traveling when she nearly plowed into him, a pair of headlights break over the horizon. The engine roaring loudly as it accelerates towards them, but is quick to pull to a stop alongside hers. Will instantly recognizing it as Jim’s even before he exits; his gait slow and hitching as he starts toward him.

Having hardly even seated herself inside her own car for no more than a minute, the trooper clambers frantically out at the sight of Jim; hightailing it to intercept him before he has a chance to reach Will.

“Hey there, Miss Samantha,” Jim beams, his steps unfaltering. “I’m glad you managed to find my son. I was beginnin’ to worry.”

“Your son?” she questions, skeptical, spotlighting Will once more. “I haven’t seen him with you before.”

“Well," Jim starts, heaving a sigh. "He hasn’t been livin’ with me for long. He's been in an accident recently, you see, and suffers from amnesia. So, I’m caring for him ‘til he’s back on his feet,” he lies with a natural ease that equally impresses and unsettles Will greatly.

“That must be difficult for you, I’m sorry,” she sympathizes, buying into the explanation without question. “I was just about to offer him a ride to the hospital. He’s endured quite a shock.” A sheepish laugh escapes her. "I nearly ran him over."

“Is that right? Well, I wouldn't worry yourself over that. Even wildlife can take us by surprise from time to time." Jim chuckles. "And I appreciate your concern, but I’m sure he’ll be just fine,” Jim’s quick to dismiss, sidling up to Will and grasping his upper arm in a protective display. “He just needs to go home and get some rest.”

Samantha smiles genuinely, grateful to have been absolved of guilt as she lowers the flashlight, permitting Will to scrutinize her petite frame and slender face. “I know he’s in good hands.” Titling her head, she finally meets Will’s gaze. Her analyzing stare unnerving, causing him to flinch away as she says, “It’s weird, though. You seem awfully familiar. I could swear I’ve seen you somewhere.”

At that, Will feels Jim go rigid beside him. His hand convulsively tightening around Will's arm, fingers digging into his flesh hard enough that he’s certain to bruise. Will not needing to look to perceive the warning for what it is.

“There's always a possibility,” Will returns, releasing a breathy laugh.

“Maybe,” she agrees, eyes searching his face for something before turning to address Jim once more. “Well, I should let you get home, since it’s freezing out here. But I hope we’ll see you around sometime soon? Possibly, for the church potluck in a few weeks? You can definitely bring him along with you.”

“Of course," Jim assures, not bothering to relax his grip as he practically yanks Will towards the truck. “You have a good night, now. And thank you, again. I’ll make sure to keep a better eye on him.”

"Anytime." She nods, escorting them until they reach their respective vehicles. "Just glad he isn't hurt."

Will slides into the blessed warmth of the truck a couple minutes later; dazed and bit out of sorts. Observing the fading glow of Samantha’s taillights, as her car vanishes around the

bend. And jerking when Jim exhales a breath of relief, his fingers drumming repetitively against the stitching of the steering wheel. Evidently, lost to his thoughts.

Minutes of tense silence tick by as they continue to sit idly; absently staring out into the night, gazing at the stars unobscured by light pollution.

“Why did you lie?” Will questions at length, growing wary of the man’s altruistic intentions toward him thus far.

Jim remains silent, gaze steadfast on some distant point in the road—the weight of unspoken words nearly palpable within the confines of the truck’s metal framework. His answer, apparently, not forthcoming, as he turns the key to the ignition, and shifts into drive.

Chapter End Notes

‘In all of us, even in good men, there is a lawless wild-beast nature, which peers out in sleep.’ -Socrates

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> Ugh, this chapter was so hard to write out for some reason. I hope it's to everyone's liking. Thanks again for reading.

Chapter Four

Jim, thereafter, wastes no time taking precautionary measures toward Will's somnambulism.

Returning from another excursion to town the following afternoon carting a large bag of supplies, he instructs Will to commence preparations for lunch while he immediately sets to work. Too engrossed in his tasks to be bothered whenever Will decidedly meanders over from the kitchen to oversee the process, observing Jim drill into the wood grain of each doorframe and windowsill, attaching deadbolts and other various locks and latches. Even going to the extent of exchanging the current doorknobs with those that require a key to open before mounting several motion detection devices along the cabin's perimeter, both interior and exterior.

It's an exceptionally thorough system. *Maybe, a little too well purposed for the cause*, he considers. And although Jim reassures him over his shoulder as he's wrapping up that he'll have free range of the cabin during daylight hours, the implication of entrapment at any given moment doesn't bode well. Especially, since Jim has yet to impart how long Will's expected to stay, or for that matter, if he's even free to leave. A sense of foreboding nagging at him as he pads back to the kitchen with Benny circling his legs, bouncing playfully with a stuffed bear dangling from her mouth.

After rewarding her affectionate display with a scratch behind the ears, Will adjusts the sling to better support his casted arm before turning back to the boiling contents of the cast iron pot on the stovetop. Relishing the comforting weight against his calf as Benny settles onto the floor beside him, nosing her toy until it overlays his toes—a mere token of friendship he's perfectly inclined to accept.

"Thanks, girl." He smiles down at her, and releases an amused breath as her tail swishes appreciatively back and forth across the slate laminate tiling of the kitchen floor.

Cooking one-handed proves tedious, but manageable. Though, he certainly could do without the weight of Jim's probing gaze on his backside. Feeling his skin prickle under the heavy scrutiny as he adds the pre-cooked sausage, okra, and rice with seasonings to the gumbo, then reduces the heat to simmer for another ten minutes.

"It's been about two weeks since I picked you up off the roadside," Jim starts suddenly, as though having read Will's mind. The scraping of a stool as it's dragged from underneath the island grating painfully against his ears. "You should've recovered more than just your name by now."

His tone is nothing if not accusatory. Obviously, suspecting Will has been feigning his memory loss all along. The irony of the man's distrust almost eliciting a laugh from him.

Glancing over his shoulder, he takes in the sight of Jim perched at the island, still clad in the horrendous Christmas sweater Will's seen him in since the moment cognizance returned. And from the state of it—the material worn and faded, stitching coming undone in random places—Will speculates he's far too fond of it to consider wearing anything else.

"Did I sustain any head injuries?" Will queries, moving to lay the wooden mixing spoon onto the folded hand towel on the countertop before casually stepping over Benny to join him—stooping low to collect her gift to him in the process, and hearing the thwack of her tail against the floor in delighted response.

"You showed no visible signs of there bein' one: no open wounds, lumps, or concussion to any degree," Jim replies gruffly, scrubbing at the stubble blanketing his chin. "Aside from the laceration I patched up on your cheek, that is. I guess it's suffice to say that although you've been through the wringer, you at least kept your head—in a manner of speakin'."

Will seats himself at the opposite end of the island, placing the stuffed bear onto its glossy, marble surface, and absently traces the raised edge of his scar with the pad of his forefinger. Hazy shadows of his previous life dancing along the peripheries of conscious thought.

"Maybe some things are best left forgotten."

Jim makes a low, contemplative sound at that, shifting minutely on his seat. "You ever figure out who the man is?"

Heaving a sigh, Will shakes his head slowly, and cards a hand through his soft, unkempt curls. Unwilling, at least for now, to disclose any details of the dreams that have plagued him. An odd instinct to protect his nameless guardian arising from some fathomless place within.

"Who knitted your sweater?" Will endeavors to divert the conversation, fidgeting with the stuffed bear's partially ripped arm—pinching at the exposed cotton spilling from the split seam. "Must have been someone very important to you."

It all happens dizzyingly quick. The air shifts as a familiar crackle of energy scales his flesh, causing his breath to catch in his throat when he feels the sensation of his heart plummeting to the ground. And shudders from a bitter chill creeping over him, freezing him to his core, just as a simultaneous inferno ignites and rages behind his ribs. Emotions of loss, anger, and

despair vying for dominance—clashing together repeatedly and tearing at his insides with a promise to bleed him raw, while a sense of incompletion crashes down around him.

There's a flash in his mind's eye of a casket being lowered into the hollow depths of the earth, and a dawning understanding of the length of time that still remains. Then, Will blinks, and his entire world upheaves as he works hastily to detach himself from the intangible conduit connecting him and the doctor's internal crisis—piece by piece until a boundary's established. Aware, only now, of the small margin of space separating their faces. His mind belatedly catching up to the fact Jim's reached over the island to wrench Will closer, the edge of it biting sharply into Will's abdomen for emphasis. Comprehending, that it has been Jim's emotions he's been experiencing.

"How dare you," Jim nearly snarls, tightening his hand fisted in the material of Will's shirt. "You son of a bitch. How *dare* you!"

Will maintains firm eye contact despite the overwhelming impulse to shove him away. Taking in the verdant colored flecks encompassing Jim's dilated pupils that branch out into the cooler blue tones of his irises. The overpowering scent of mint mixed with a stale hint of coffee heavy on his breath as it ghosts hotly across his face.

But Jim isn't seeing him. No, rather, he's superimposing an image of someone else onto Will involuntarily. A trigger response, Will recognizes, that's usually associated with post-traumatic episodes. Though, he can't say for certain how he knows that to be the case now.

"I'm sorry," Will begins calmly, voice subdued to coax him out from his living nightmares. "It's not easy losing a child. Especially, when we feel we could've done something to prevent it," he clarifies, distantly feeling like he's speaking from personal experience.

It seems to be the right thing to say, however. And relief overcomes him when Jim relinquishes him abruptly, his eyes refocusing as he steadily comes back to himself. The haunting tableau which blinded him to reality receding rapidly behind his mental barriers. A vision of his son—likely mangled and bloody—burned forever on his retinas.

"Who killed him?" Will presses gently as soon as Jim regains his equilibrium, not needing validation for his conjecture given the extremity of the doctor's reaction.

Jim palms his face with a trembling hand, resolutely avoiding Will's eyes as he fixes his gaze on a specific spot just beyond Will's left shoulder. His lips taut over clenched teeth as he spits out indignantly, "The devil."

~*~

Time progresses at a gradual rate. Cabin fever starting to best him during Jim's recent absences to town, volunteering down at the clinic due to a sweeping flu epidemic. The high demand for aid stealing most of the doctor's time, leaving Will to mill about unsupervised for

several hours each day. A freedom he wouldn't mind as much if he were to have some kind of project to hamper the onsets of stir-crazy. Or at the very least, something to distract him from what lurks within the dark alcoves of his mind—calling for him like a siren to a sailor lost at sea.

And after days of sitting around with nothing but the company of his disconcerting thoughts, Will resolves he's finally had enough.

Setting down his coffee mug only minutes after Jim's departure early in the morning, he purposely heads upstairs to rifle through the man's drawers for warmer clothing. Planning, originally, to take a hike through the backwoods with Benny until he chances upon a fishing rod nestled in the corner of the bedroom closet, and a lure box directly above it on the shelf once he uncovers it from its concealment of assorted baseball caps. Elation bubbling at the vague familiarity that comes with setting them on the bed, and disregarding the piercing sting from his scar as a smile splits his face; fumbling hurriedly to dress himself.

Digging in the closet again, Will comes across an extra pair of hiking boots; a size too big, but beggars can't be choosers. Though, the grueling task of lacing them detracts greatly from the gratitude he feels as he's forced to utilize his teeth to accomplish the feat. Resulting in him sitting there, winded, for several minutes after the knot of the last boot's been pulled taut.

Eventually, he catches his breath and stumbles back to his feet. Making to re-adjust his sling before gathering up the fishing gear again; tucking the rod underneath his arm in order to free his hand to carry the box. His socked feet slipping within the excess spaces of the boots while he marches down the steps.

Benny leaps instantly to her feet when she catches sight of him; her body visibly vibrating, expectant of the coming adventure his semblance intimates. His grin widening when her demeanor snaps from anticipatory to that of sheer jubilance with the slightest gesture towards the door. Her bark of excitement a wonderful sound as any as she bounds straight for it with immeasurable glee.

However, regardless of his own joy, Will can't shake the perturbing sense of normalcy the scene sparks in him as he pads over to her. Nudging her away with his leg, so he's free to reach the door, and places the key into the lock. But doesn't get very far after that when he's suddenly overtaken by a memory of him standing in the living area of a familiar home; sunlight bathing the furniture in slanted, golden streaks, as a pack of dogs paw at him, pleading for attention.

"You can go home again. If there's any point?"

A stag materializes before him, blocking his path, and casting its shadow across the threadbare carpeting of the room. Its presence indomitable, but not entirely unwelcome.

"Is there any point?" Will returns, despondent when, one by one, the dogs commence vanishing at his feet. "Was there ever truly a home for me?"

But he receives no answer, no reassurances, only a rush of fear when the stag unexpectedly charges him.

Will jolts, flooding back to himself with a gasp for air; his hand aching in protest from clutching the doorknob tenaciously. Soft whines feathering into his ear as he glances down to discover Benny staring up at him, her head cocked minimally to the side, clearly concerned.

“Sorry,” Will mumbles, still not quite himself as he wrenches the door open to allow her to pass, and bends to retrieve the lure box from its temporary placement on the ground. Feeling woozy with the onset of a headache, as he navigates the dirt path from the cabin; remarking how unsteady his footing is the entire trek to the waterfront.

He stops immediately, however, when Benny—who has happily trotted ahead—balks after emerging from some underbrush. Her eyes trained forward as she instinctively alters her stance to intimidate whatever threat has presented itself. The low growl of warning that escapes her somewhat startling when Will finally approaches to identify the source of her raised hackles.

A small motorized boat sits tethered to the weathered dock as an unidentified man clambers out of it; short in stature, a bit portly, and peculiarly attired in full tux. In his hand, Will notices, he carries a sleek, black briefcase that’s fastened to his person by a set of handcuffs —an indication of critical importance.

Benny growls louder as the stranger dutifully strides toward them, and Will hastily places the fishing gear down to ready himself for any possibility of an assault. His instincts telling him to prepare for the worst when the man comes to a halt as soon as his well-polished dress shoes hit sand.

“Who are you?” Will demands, and follows his gaze as it falls upon Benny, remaining there for some time before eventually returning to him.

Will tenses, uncertain whether to flee or stand his ground as the man reaches inside his suit jacket. Perplexed, when he produces a plain manila envelope instead of a gun like Will anticipated. His stare unwavering while he extends it out in silent invitation.

“Stay,” Will commands when Benny attempts to trail him, a look of confusion crossing her features as she grudgingly obeys. Though, for Will’s benefit, she loyally retains her guard; gearing to strike if the man even so much as twitches wrong.

The distance between them diminishes rapidly under the soles of his boots, but Will doesn’t continue on once he’s a little more than an arm’s length away. Taken aback by the pronounced fear he finds in the man’s dark eyes upon moving to accept it, causing his fingers to pause just an inch shy of the package.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me when I grab it?” Will questions, noting the desperation in the curt shake of the man’s head. “Are you going to be hurt if I don’t?”

Small beads of perspiration begin soaking the man’s hairline as he nods his affirmative; his hand still out in offering.

Will glimpses the briefcase, but the man’s quick to regain his attention with a little insistent shake of the envelope. Which Will promptly takes—only to flinch back in alarm as the man

suddenly bolts back to the boat like a bat out of Hell; refusing to look over his shoulder in the process of unhooking the rope. Benny already at the end of the dock by the time he's aboard, and barking wildly after him as he turns over the engine and speeds off. The urgency in his retreat glaringly ominous, and immensely disquieting.

The envelope has some bulk to it, sitting heavily in his hand. And as he clumsily flips it to examine the other side, he swears his heart nearly stops at the sight of his name penned flawlessly across its immaculate surface:

Will

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Five

Will can't bring himself to open it immediately.

Instead, he wraps the envelope in his borrowed jacket to protect it against potential water damage, and carries on with the initial plan to fish as though nothing's transpired. But the simplicity of the activity hardly mitigates his general state of unease, and he hikes back no more than an hour later with a scarcely meal-worthy salmon and a sodden, mud-caked dog to show for his efforts.

The headache that's been brewing beneath the surface burgeons into a migraine by the time he's sliding the key inside the lock—telling Benny to stay put as he crosses the threshold, knowing well that Jim wouldn't appreciate her tracking in mud. And immediately discerns, upon entering, a degree difference in the atmosphere that sends an unpleasant chill down his spine as he deposits the rod and lure box by the door.

Shuffling warily toward the kitchen, Will surveys the area, but doesn't discover anything missing or out of the ordinary. No visible signs that the security devices have been tampered with—as far as he can tell—nor any evidence giving rational cause for concern. Yet, he's incapable of fully dismissing the static charge diffusing the air, neither the fact someone's been adamantly searching for him for some time now, it seems.

He'd be a fool to presume he isn't being watched.

Plopping the salmon onto the island, Will wipes his hand dry against his jeans before removing the envelope from the safety of the jacket's inner pocket. Tracing a finger along the curves of the distinct penmanship once he gently places it down, and hearing the clops of hooves sound from behind as he thumbs the corner of the sealed flap. Aware of the stag's return without the need for visual confirmation.

Still, he doesn't open it.

Abandoning the prospect of recourse for now, Will moves to rummage through the cabinets for cling wrap, and locates a roll tucked behind some wicker candles and a large industrial flashlight in the smaller compartments above the sink. Spotting the companionable dark mass looming in his peripherals as he pads back to wrap the salmon, only to leave it again, briefly, to hunt down a proper bowl to hold a bed of crushed ice in.

Benny whines impatiently from her position at the door, her claws clicking against the deck as she fights the innate compulsion to disobey. Her nerves still frayed from the previous encounter, eliciting her desire to remain as close to him as physically possible. An endearing trait that causes Will's lips to quirk as he sets the bowl with the fish onto the rack inside the fridge, and fetches a five gallon bucket and wash rag from the cleaning supplies cabinet beneath the sink. Dumping an overabundance of soap into it before running the tap—figuring it best if he only fills it halfway to make it easier to haul one-handed from the kitchen out to the deck without incident.

The stag hardly budges in the duration of Benny's bath; keeping a keen eye on them, while pawing the floorboards in conveyance of its frustration. Which Will disregards in favor of the task at hand. Wishing above all that he had use of his left arm in order to rein her in whenever she desires to rebuff his efforts to rid her coat of filth and grime.

It's long past the hour Jim's due home by the time he completes the arduous chore, and towels both himself and Benny dry. The sharp scent of impending rain sitting dense on the air as thunder rolls warningly overhead. Inducing Will to peer out from the shelter of the awning at the congregation of menacing storm clouds overshadowing the expansion of sky—watching as the final remnants of fading daylight yields to the ruling nature of darkness.

Benny's already fled to the relative safety of indoors when he decides to venture back in. Finding her cowering beside the chesterfield, staring up at him imploringly as though he, personally, has influence over the weather. And hushes her with a reassuring pat on the head before collapsing boneless onto the lumpy cushions of the sofa, groaning miserably at the stabbing pain behind his eyes when the migraine all but consumes him.

The stag exhales its disapproval at his blatant disinclination to view the contents merely a few feet away. Distracting him from Benny who then decides, seconds after, to leap on top of him; her sudden weight at his abdomen punching the breath from his lungs.

Once she eventually settles—still quivering from the ferocity of the storm—Will relaxes, allowing himself to drift away to some distant, exquisitely designed chapel. Its chamber painted by the glow from candelabras, that not only give emphasis to its golden archways and various intricate patterns, but the elegant and immaculate features of the nameless man who now stands in a pool of blood before the altar, his broad back facing Will.

~*~

Will wakes with a start; drenched in a cold sweat and besieged by pitch-darkness. The unremitting howl of the wind the only sound welcoming him, other than his own rapid, shallow breaths and the intermittent groaning of the cabin's structure under strain.

A scuff of a hoof sounding from beside the chesterfield incites him to hastily sit upright, gritting his teeth against the painful pull of damp skin separating from the leather upholstery; poof that he's been asleep for at least a good few hours. And wobbles as he blindly feels his way over to the small portion of wall that holds the only light switch pad.

The overhead lights of the kitchen flicker on with a low buzz, causing him to blink back the sudden brightness flooding his pupils. And is unsurprised—once his eyes have adjusted—to see the stag hovering near the side of the island where the envelope still lies, untouched. Its eyes flashing with some indecipherable emotion before emitting a low-pitched whine, head jerking with clear indication.

It takes a full minute for his brain to fully catch up to the fact he's crossed the short distance between the wall and the island, and that he has begun unsealing the envelope. A quarter of it now ripped open, exposing the glossy, rounded edge of the object inside.

Curiosity piqued, Will wastes no additional time tearing through the remaining glued inches of the flap. Careful to avoid any undue damage by pinching the opposite end as he gently shakes the contents free of their casing and out onto the marbled surface. The tablet emerging first, followed swiftly by a seemingly blank card, which glides across the dark screen, and right off the edge of the island—landing angled against the midsole of his right boot. But Will doesn't bother with it, for now. Opting, instead, to focus his attention entirely on the device before him. His hand smoothing over the side until he locates the power button—and is instantly hit with a bold, large-print headline as soon as it flares to life:

MURDER HUSBANDS AT LARGE

Directly below are two mugshots lined side by side; one of himself—unmarred—and the other…

Will skims the article. Taking in the verbose diction of the author, who has gladly taken the liberty of raking a multitude of people across the coals for their remiss, unprofessional conducts. And those, by her standpoint, which have ultimately resulted in not only the escape of a dangerous serial killer, but also in the reuniting of a lethal love affair between himself and said murderer.

The chill that creeps up his spine, foreboding, as his eyes scan the final paragraph:

> **It's unclear what the FBI's intentions may be concerning the apprehension of the infamous duo; especially, given a severe lack of public awareness. Therefore, please be advised to maintain vigilance, as these are two highly intelligent and well-experienced killers [Will Graham pictured left, Dr. Hannibal Lecter pictured right]. Do not engage either directly.**

The photograph burns into his mind, igniting the cobwebs that've taken up residence, as red-hot pain lances through his skull, forcing him to double over. His world beneath him tilting and rotating at a dizzying rate, while the floodgates of his consciousness burst forth from their constraints. Fragmented memories rushing over the barren landscape, and pushing him to depths he's never dared to fathom.

He's falling. Waves breaking against the bluff below. A sensation of completion swelling up inside him as he buries his face against the man's neck. *My becoming—this is my design.*

He's dining in an elegant *salle à manger*; the lit fireplace providing subdued lighting, flavors bursting over his tongue as he sits in good company.

He's lying on a kitchen floor, clutching his abdomen with little hope to stem the outpouring of his own blood. Watching from the corner of his eye as the once mighty stag heaves its pained, final breath.

He's—

A distant barking curtails the recollection and effectively thrusts him from the maelstrom of his mind to that of reality. Gravity seemingly crashing down upon him as he comes to comprehend that he's fallen to his knees. The yellow bruising of his hand now streaked over crimson with blood from his nostrils as he reaches for the disregarded, upturned card on the floor—its message concise, but irrevocably damning:

He knows. -H

The barking resounds again, scarcely audible over the wind. Bringing with it, a dawning realization that he's woken up, alone. His wriggly, amicable companion nowhere to be found.

Benny.

Stumbling to his feet, Will snatches the flashlight from the cabinet, and proceeds with little hesitation out the door. Shivering, as icy rain pelts him the second he steps from the shelter of the deck, uncaring that he'll be soaked through in minutes.

Jim's truck's still missing, but Will doesn't have to time to bother with his whereabouts as he treks down the muddy path, giving a loud whistle in hopes to prompt Benny to guide him. Still remarking the fact she managed to escape the cabin without rousing him; especially, since a number of the alarms were still set to go off.

Will whistles again after an unnerving stretch of silence, and is relieved to hear the responding muffled bark from somewhere off to his left. The rain stinging his eyes as he thunders into the woods; fighting off low-hanging branches and other obstacles threatening to impede his current mission.

Thankfully, it's not long before he spots her; shuddering, wet, and tethered to a tree. The sight bringing him to an immediate halt, as he instinctively sweeps his flashlight in various directions for any signs of movement. Hearing nothing but Benny's pleading whines and the clamor of the storm.

Even despite the area looking clear, Will doesn't dare move toward her yet, knowing a predator will only make to strike efficiently when the prey is no longer on its guard.

So, instead, he waits.

Listens.

Right there.

Will twists just as an arm endeavors to snake around his neck, and lands a solid blow with the flashlight to the old doctor's side; reveling in the resounding cry of pain that rises a few notches above the wind. However, it's not enough to stun him as Will had hoped, as he sees bright spots explode across his vision from a powerful fist that catches him at the jaw. The force of it propelling him backwards—only to just barely manage to keep his bearings in time for the next one, which sends him careening sideways into the sodden grass and mud.

The world beneath him spins unceasingly as he fights to regain his senses. Feeling the flashlight roughly tugged from his grasp before white-hot pain blooms across his face from being whipped with it. His mouth deluging a familiar metallic taste of blood, as a high-pitched ringing erupts in his ears, canceling out Benny's desperate barks and the periodic claps of thunder.

Jim comes to loom over him, and Will makes a valiant effort to kick at him, but his uncoordinated assaults are easily avoided. A painful sound being wrenched from him at the sharp sting of a needle before he's hoisted to his feet with an impressive show of strength. Jim catching his weight as he slumps against him, the drugs coupled with the obvious head trauma beginning to take effect. Watching as his already hazy and fragmented world splinters and dims, while he's dragged several yards before being unconcernedly tossed down what he can only presume to be a short flight of concrete stairs.

Fighting for breath, Will spectates from his position below as the blinding glare of Jim's flashlight turns away from him suddenly. Jim's yell seeming miles away as something attacks him from behind—Benny's aggressive snarling echoing off the walls of the hollow he's in.

Will futilely fends off the call of oblivion for a minute longer before his eyes close of their own volition. His last paling seconds of consciousness being that of a deafening gunshot and pained yelp, then silence.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are much appreciated!

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

Will fades in.

Distantly, he's aware of being carried; his dead weight draped over someone's broad shoulder, as his head sways freely with each step of their uneven gait. His body is unresponsive, possibly rendered immobile by the narcotics circulating through his system. And his vision comes as a ruined mess of light and shadow, shrouded by a tinted haze.

Something akin to panic claws at him when a shrill squeak pierces his eardrums seconds later. But he's, unfortunately, unable to retain consciousness long enough to distinguish its source, as his bleary world commences to rush inwards. The force of it sweeping him back beneath the calm, aphotic waters of a bloody, fathomless sea.

~*~

He gradually surfaces at the sound of his name. Becoming increasingly aware of a pleasant heat bathing his side and an exponential pressure encircling his wrist, guiding him closer to consciousness. The heavy sensation of his limbs returning subsequent to rising from the abyss, his soul seeking a solid form it recognizes.

"Will," the voice repeats, insistent. "Come back to me, Will."

Releasing an elongated breath, Will finally rouses. And after another protracted minute, pries his eyes open to discover himself reclined awkwardly in a chair, his neck bent at a painful angle. Before him, a man leans casually against the edge of a wooden desk, his profile caressed by soft firelight. The tips of his fingers trailing lines over the dips of Will's knuckles in their steady retreat.

“Hannibal?” Will murmurs, disbelieving, as he moves to sit upright. Casting a questioning glance to the darkened end of the room, while wracking his brain to recall the events that may have led him here. “Am I…? Is this a dream?”

Lips quirking, Hannibal fluidly straightens; habitually smoothing down the bunched material of his suit jacket.

“Perhaps.” He turns to Will, intrigue playing upon his face. “I believe that depends entirely on your perception.” When Will furrows his brows at his cryptic answer, Hannibal expands, “It’s never been made clear whether or not you have fully grasped the concept of what we share. Therefore, it comes as a surprise that I find you here, now.”

“And where would ‘here’ be, exactly?” Will wonders, though he senses the answer should be obvious.

The man’s mouth thins to something akin to a frown, clearly disappointed. “You have successfully hidden yourself away, my dear Will. So far beyond reach, that I almost could not locate you, even within our shared spaces.” Hannibal regards the fire, then, with a countenance that edges on plaintive.

Will bites back a sudden swell of guilt surging upwards from the pit of his stomach. His voice cracking as his confession spills out unbidden, “I was worried you were dead.”

His words seem to strike a chord, as something indecipherable fleets across Hannibal’s otherwise impassive face. Clicking his tongue behind his teeth, he returns his attention to Will, considering him intently. “I’ve worked under the impression of that being your ultimate goal.” Ardor blazes brightly within the dark depths of his eyes, burning holes through Will’s defenses. “My death being a testament to your becoming,” he finishes with hardly restrained pride.

Will swallows thickly, recalling the fractured memory of their plummet to the sea—of strong, embracing arms, and soft lips against his temple. *My becoming. This is my design.* “Why disregard your self-preservation when you never have before?”

Head tilting a fraction in momentary thought, Hannibal swiftly answers, “You had no intentions to survive yourself. It was only fitting that I was to be your first and final witness —to behold you and be summarily consumed.”

“You could never stand the thought of separation,” Will observes, reading easily between the

lines. “You would permit me your sacrifice, if that meant we never part again.”

Hannibal smiles, inscrutably. “It was an honor, my dear Will. A sacrifice requires some form of disinclination.”

Frowning slightly, Will returns, “Which is why you pointed out the erosion of the bluff; manipulated a win for us both.”

“Have we not always sought that result?”

Will makes to respond, but is curtailed by a sequence of barks that reverberates in the space around them—ones he recognizes achingly well.

“Benny?” He gasps, clambering from the chair to better face the direction where the sound emanated from, hoping to catch sight of his jubilant companion. But she doesn’t emerge; the darkness vast and held at bay by a circumference of light.

Hannibal moves to hover at his backside, breaths tickling the hairs on Will’s nape. “You know this dog?”

“Yes.” Will swallows again, planting his hands on the smooth surface of the desk. Desperately, trying to make sense of this ongoing illusion, if that’s even what he can call it.

There’s a contemplative hum followed by a puff of hot air against his skin, but when he turns his head to regard the man, he finds Hannibal vanished. The firelight flickering wildly, as blood commences trickling from the chimney. Smoke curling through the mesh when the liquid burgeons into a waterfall; snuffing out the light and rapidly reaching across the decorative rug to lap at his boots. Soaking through to the material of his socks.

He can’t move; caught in some intangible vice, as the blood swells, inching up his legs. “Hannibal,” he calls, voice straining with panic, and is met with no reply. “Hannibal!”

Will suddenly wrenches from the apparent dream to awake in a dimly lit chamber, and to a shock of cold piercing him to the depths of his bones; his entire body wracked with violent shivers. There’s a rushing clamor that seems to reverberate all around him, as his drug-addled brain sluggishly takes stock of his situation; restrained by the wrists to a rough wall of brick, and submerged up to his waist in churning, pitch dark sea water spilling in from large pipes.

Head throbbing, Will squints to find he's in what appears to be an underground dungeon. The raised platform overlooking the evident death pit he's in currently a perfect spot for a spectator. One such as the old doctor, who's now menacingly crouched and partially bathed in light. A crafty smile spreading wide across his once gentle, amicable face.

"Thought you had me fooled, did you?" Jim starts; his southern drawl notably gone, and replaced by an accent entirely too familiar to disregard. "Play the fool to fool all fools." His grin expands, amused. "One of his favorite games." A beat. "And mine."

The water swells higher, as though timed for dramatic effect. Coming to halt just short of Will's chest to steal his breath, as well as the response perched upon his tongue.

"I suppose you have many questions for me," Jim carries on with a disappointed huff. "Though, admittedly, I thought more of Hannibal's chosen—imagined you to be equally formidable. Perhaps, Miss Lounds was wrong in her estimation of you."

Will chuckles weakly despite himself, his teeth chattering uncontrollably. "Y-you seem awfully c-confident in y-your assessment."

"There has yet to be a reason I shouldn't be." Jim stands in one fluid motion, the acoustics amplifying the grating crunch of gravel underfoot. "But it's no longer a matter of consequence. You're simply here to serve a purpose, nothing more."

"Bait?" Will guesses, struggling feebly against his metal bonds. "What makes you so s-sure he'll come?"

"He will come," Jim states, matter-of-fact. "It is a meeting long overdue."

"The Chesapeake Ripper k-killed your son."

Jim's smile drops instantly at Will's abrupt insight, hands clenching into tight fists at his side. "Yes. Though, he had not quite made his mark upon the world to be known as such, at the time. He has, since Benjamin's death, gained many monikers." He sighs. "Of course, I have followed each one. And being the ever elusive hunter that he is, I could scarcely keep pace."

A small, helpless sound escapes Will, as the water level climbs threateningly to his chin. Will belatedly registering he only has mere minutes before he's entirely immersed; that Jim

wholly doesn't intend for him to remain alive for their reunion. Allowing the sea to steal him away, as it once strived to do.

"Y-you were th-there," Will realizes, tilting his head upwards in a futile attempt to keep the sea at bay. "Y-you were planning t-to exact r-revenge that night. Knew of his release f-from Tattlecrime. Saw us kill. Watched us fall." He coughs, salt water stinging the open wound across his bottom lip. "S-searched for us afterwards."

"I had rather hoped to locate him, but as serendipity would have it, I happened upon you, instead," the doctor confirms. "He stole someone priceless from me, and now I am to do the same. Any final messages for him you wish to impart, Mr. Graham?"

Will strains his neck, the water beginning to fill his mouth. His heart hammering wildly in his chest, as he just barely chokes out: "It's still beautiful." And resigns himself to his fate, as he draws in what's to be his final breath.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Enter Hannibal

Chapter Seven

"It's beautiful."

The plummet from the precipice stretches for what seems like eons. At some point, Hannibal swears they cease falling altogether—suspended eternally on the cusp of life and death. Their hearts beating in unison against the cage of their bones, and beasts sated by the blood of their enemy—only to soon be baptized by the churning waters below. A ritualistic cleansing, so it seems; washing away the sins of the mortal world. Which, no doubt, is Will's precise intention.

"We're conjoined," the voice rises from the depths of his subconscious, echoing off the golden archways along the grand corridor of his mind palace. Its sweet cadence tempering the grating howling upwind and clamor of the roiling sea. *"I'm curious whether either of us can survive separation."*

Hannibal smiles, triumphantly. Will's conclusion to their personal trial as transparent as the glass of his cell that not long ago Will pressed against in unspoken longing. Even with the keen stab of Will's attempted rejection, Hannibal's never been fooled. The fact he read Hannibal's letter warning him to maintain distance, only to disregard it, is all Hannibal ever needed to perceive his truer feelings; turning his back on his newfound life, an answer in itself.

Will cannot survive without him.

Just as surely as Hannibal cannot without the man who's swiftly and stealthily invaded every aspect of his own life. Their circling dance of dominance bringing about a mutual conquering that has, effectually, blurred the divide and crumbled the solid borders which once individualized them. Much like the dueling waltz of two black holes battling the other's

gravity, until there is surrender; their entities coalescing to become one massive, irrepressible force.

"It's all starting to blur."

The lamb has now transformed. Emerging from the meek herd and shedding its wool to reveal the majestic wolf it's always been; eyes keen, teeth bared, and bloody muzzle pointed skyward in a victorious howl. The aspects of the creature as stunning as Hannibal envisioned, while meticulously cultivating Will's becoming. A worthy mate to his own beast, if there's ever one—two sides of the same coin.

And, evidently, still not entirely predictable.

Hannibal tightens his hold in an equal act of possessiveness and protection, which prevents any margin of separation where gravity is concerned. Committing to memory the solid form of Will in his arms as he brushes lips across the man's temple in a tender farewell. Content to spend his final moments nowhere else but in the embrace of his beloved—their story coming to a Shakespearean close.

Beautiful, indeed.

~*~

Lucidity returns to him in increments. Vague sensations vying for dominance while he lazily surfaces from the recesses of unconsciousness; disoriented and, to his surprise, alive.

There's a discernible tang of blood mixed sourly with the salt of the Atlantic coating his tongue. The pungent combination eliciting him to cough feebly, and wincing when white-hot pain lances up his right side. His hand weakly sliding across the mound of blankets atop him to rest over the wound, certain by the lack of blood that it's been adequately patched up.

Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata feathers softly into his ears a second after as the veil of silence encasing him steadily begins to lift. The familiar melody soothing him while he fights to regain an ounce of his ironclad control. Managing to force open his eyes to take in the bleary, dim lighting, and unfocused features of the room. Finding the walls and furniture not unbearably white, and the area itself devoid of any federal agents or daunted staff members hovering at his bedside.

Not a general hospital or BSHCI's medical ward, Hannibal bases his conclusion on the more personal details of knickknacks, which he strains to see from his current disadvantaged position on the bed. The stale, musty quality of the air that's filtering through his nostrils an entirely unpleasant experience, until another familiar essence registers. The mystery of his location suddenly solved with the distinct, objectionable scent that is specific to a brand of cologne with a ship printed on the label.

Will.

The bed springs squeak under his weight when he levers himself upright. Taking stock of the aches and sharp pains with each movement, and determining the damage is widespread with lacerations of varying degrees and unsightly bruising. Though, all things considered, he's not nearly in as severe of shape as he initially believed. Relatively unscathed, as though he hadn't been the one to take the brunt of the fall.

Soft light spills across the duvet from the living area that, once his eyesight clears, Hannibal recognizes instantly. The interior entirely unchanged since he last returned Will home, and handed himself over to Jack's custody.

Pulling the blankets aside, he gingerly swings his legs over the edge of the mattress, and glances down his body to inspect his bare torso. Observing the thick layer of gauze adhered to the bullet wound dye a light pink, a scant amount of blood seeping through the patch work. He releases a soft sigh as he realizes he'll have to re-work the stitching and clean it soon to avoid any complications.

Gripping the bedside table, Hannibal shakily rises to stand. The floor chilly beneath the pads of his feet as he sluggishly and quietly moves in direction of the music. Rounding the corner to discover not Will, but someone else entirely. Her head bowed low and eyes focused on the notes inked across the paper.

"I did not expect you to wake for some time," Chiyoh starts at length; unfaltering in her movements, resolving herself to complete the score. "You should still be resting."

He allows a small smile to grace his lips at her endearing concern.

"Perhaps. However, I have always proven to heal rather quickly. My convalescences hardly ever lasting the full duration expected." He glances about the room, soaking in the atmosphere created by Will—settling into it again with ease, as though he's never departed it.

The number of visits he's made to the quaint farmhouse within his mind, while locked inside the walls of the prison, is beyond his immediate knowledge. Always stepping inside in hopes of catching Will assembling his lures, or immersed in the internal workings of another boat motor with his pack lounging at random at his feet; oil and grime staining his skin up to his elbows. Sometimes, they would converse teacups and variables of time by the fire, sipping indulgently on whiskey. While others, Hannibal would be content to sit alone, silently enjoying the habits of his daily routine.

It's only when the news of Will's official leave of the FBI and the little house reached him did Hannibal bar the door shut; not wishing to return if it meant Will would not be present for

his company.

Though, it is quite interesting that Will didn't sell the property subsequent to his nuptials. The house dusty, untidy, and littered with a few boxes, but not abandoned. His preservation of this piece of the past significant, and the possible reasons for doing so, many.

How often did Will escape from insipid domesticity in search of this familiar comfort?

What did he hope to find with each visitation?

Hannibal scans the mantel, the walls, and discovers no evidence of the life Will lived in his absence. Not a single photograph or incongruous object to hint at a family man, which Hannibal finds even more intriguing. Warmth blooming in his chest at the notion that the wife and child haven't been privy to this intimate space, and that the memories imprinted are reserved for only those who have previously stepped foot within.

Namely, himself.

The music ebbs, then dies; permitting a cold silence to permeate and rankle. His body already weakening considerably with the short period of standing. Trembling from coupled exhaustion and trauma of the battle as he shuffles languidly away to carefully seat himself onto one of the armchairs. Noting how his trusted companion is deliberately not forthcoming on the details of his rescue; opting, wisely, to take her cues from him in order to respond accordingly.

Her reticence conveying a plea to spare the messenger bearing grave news.

"You could not find him," Hannibal guesses to her backside, dread bleeding through to his core to extinguish the comforting warmth. "How long did you search?"

Chiyoh traces the keys with the tips of her fingers before rotating to face him; her eyes heavily guarded, shielding her mind from his. "As long as I could risk. The storm released its vengeance shortly after I pulled you from the sea."

Hannibal scrutinizes her features intently, quietly impressed by the solidity of her mask. A knowing, thin-lipped smile curling the corners of his mouth. "You believe him dead."

"One cannot know the fate of another with certainty," she counters, easily perceiving the underlying censure and thinly veiled threat. "Unless, they are responsible for it."

Hannibal inclines his head a degree at that, acknowledging the shift of blame as fair play.

"How many days have passed?" he wonders, absolving her of guilt; at least, for now.

"Just one." She tears her gaze from him to settle it on a small figurine on the mantel, visibly relieved to know the snake is not yet intending to strike. "Your cognizance has been a fleeting affair."

Hannibal hums in understanding. Frustrated, to have no memory of his rare lucidity. Begging the question of what news he's missed—surely, by this point, a manhunt is well underway.

“What of Jack Crawford?” he nudges, seeking the information he requires to either evade detection or willingly surrender—that is only if Jack’s located Will. Even despite Will’s deal, he knows Jack’s influential reach will fall short in saving Will this time around. The death penalty could be possible, if not probable, given the testimonies that’ll be leveraged against him.

“There has been no word of anything; it has been radio silent,” Chiyoh answers, apologetically, then stands quickly when the shrill whistle of a teapot cuts through the air. Boards creaking underfoot as she heads straight for the kitchen without further comment, leaving Hannibal to his reserved speculations.

Closing his eyes, Hannibal enters his palace and guides himself through the opulent corridors, until he reaches the correct chamber. Returning to the bluff in hopes to happen upon Will, and luckily discovers the figure of him facing the formidable sea, shrouded in shadow. The wind cool against Hannibal’s face as he patiently waits for the man to face him. His concern increasing when Will appears apprehensive and distant when doing so.

“Don’t retreat within yourself, little lamb,” Hannibal starts, sensing his beloved’s vulnerability. “The wolves are circling—hungry—and you are baring your neck.” Reaching out a hand, Hannibal rests his palm against the scruff of Will’s cheek; finding it strange when he lacks a response. “Where are you?”

Will doesn’t answer, and it sparks genuine fear within him. Wondering if perhaps Will did not survived.

“Where are you?” Hannibal repeats with a note of urgency, just as Will suddenly tumbles backwards over the edge.

Vanishing into the dark waters below.

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

"Can't sleep?"

Hannibal jolts from his semi-conscious state at the familiar voice, and blinks back the sting of early daylight sneaking through the cracks in the dusty curtains. His head shifting on the pillow to take in the form of the man he's memorized from head to foot; clad in plaid as per his usual attire, and hair amess. Sitting at his bedside as though he's always been there.

Will.

Slowly, Hannibal maneuvers upright to lean against the wall; resolutely keeping his gaze on his beloved in fear he would vanish as he did beneath the waves. Fleetingly wondering if he were real or a spirit come with intent to haunt—as Mischa tends to do, periodically.

"I thought it was just me," Will continues with a heavy sigh. "I thought it was due to the encephalitis, but after my treatment, I still couldn't find a moment's rest." He crosses a leg over the other and relaxes; a mimicry of Hannibal on the last day of his freedom. "Now I believe it might be the darkness that fills this house. An all-encompassing presence that threatens to consume."

"Shadows of lives drenched in blood," Hannibal tacks on. "Where creatures lie in wait, ready to pounce." He studies Will's face—as much as possible past the glare of the sun—and clears his throat in hopes to relieve its tightness.

"Was it fear of the darkness consuming you that caused you to battle sleep?" Hannibal wonders when Will fails to respond. Seamlessly falling back into easy conversation, as though they've never ceased. "Or, possibly," he presses, "the comfort it brought you?"

Will takes another silent moment to think critically. Staring distantly at the curtains of the window directly behind Hannibal.

“Darkness has always comforted you,” he abruptly changes course, instead. “I wonder, what could you be afraid of?”

Hannibal’s lips twitch to form a frown as a young girl’s voice faintly calls out to him from a chamber deep within his mind palace. A sweet sound that eventually transitions into screams of agony.

His beloved zeroes in on his lack of reply. Shifting forwards in his seat to parody a therapist who has uncovered a large bruise on the psyche. And given Will’s empathy and overactive imagination, that could only spell danger.

“Have I abandoned you for the light?” Will verbalizes Hannibal’s inner turmoil; the words ripping deeper than any blade could penetrate. “Have I gone to a place you can’t follow?”

Hannibal steels himself as Will’s fractional pause gives weight to his words. His heart pounding against his throat in anticipation.

“Has the darkness finally betrayed you?”

“Will,” his voice cracks, a desperation he thought himself incapable of revealing itself, unbidden.

Before another word is spoken, the door unexpectedly swings open to allow a flood of sunlight inside, blinding him instantly. His eyes aching at the intrusion until the door shuts, banging loudly against the frame. The smell of sandalwood and perspiration hitting him within seconds, pungent against the comforting smell of dogs and cheap cologne.

“Hello, Jack,” he says in habitual greeting while eyeing the chair, now empty of its occupant. Finding himself shocked to have experienced another hallucination this powerful since the fateful winter decades ago.

Boards creak as Jack pads over to stand behind it, a brown bag of groceries clutched in his arm. And after a moment’s consideration, takes a seat; settling the bag onto the floor between his feet. The sight of him in Will’s place, acutely offensive.

“I’ve never taken you for someone to let his guard down, Dr. Lecter,” the man begins, interweaving his fingers together in mockery of casual conversation. “You knew I’d come here.”

Hannibal clicks his tongue against the back of his teeth in conveyance of disapproval. “It’s been nearly two weeks, Jack,” he chides. “I could have been long gone.”

Jack huffs a tired laugh, and sinks boneless against the backrest. The dark marks beneath his eyes indicating very little sleep and endless stress. No doubt being dragged through daily inquiries and reprimands by the FBI and anyone who deems him unfit.

“I held onto some modicum of hope that you would be.” His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, clearly perturbed to once more be in close proximity with a beast. “Why aren’t you gone?”

“You knew what Will was planning and sanctioned it,” Hannibal redirects the conversation with ease. “And have known of Will’s influences. So, was hope truly needed?”

“Always when it comes to you, Dr. Lecter,” Jack smirks. “Although, I have to say, it’s an advantage to know the devil’s weakness.”

“God’s faithful right hand,” Hannibal adds, shifting on the mattress to purposely trigger the man’s anxieties. No barricade of glass or flesh to separate them now. “Your lamb was sacrificial, but not in the way you intended,” he finishes.

Jack sighs heavily, sagging in his seat. “I’ve come to learn there is much to do with Will that was never intended.”

“Whatever you touched that turned to gold had consequences,” Hannibal decidedly twists the knife. “Yet, you believed Will was an exception.”

“Initially,” Jack surprisingly admits.

Inclining his head, Hannibal reads the emotions on the face of a man who’s sat at his table as simultaneous friend and foe. “Have you come to finish what you started in Italy, Jack?” he wonders. “Has the last shred of morality vanished into a cloud of golden dust?”

Jack makes an amused sound before he intakes a fortifying breath. “Not quite yet.” He boldly meets Hannibal’s gaze, a challenge. “I owe a debt of gratitude, and now I’m repaying it.”

Hannibal’s brow lifts a fraction in question. “I assume it’s not with me.”

“You assume correctly.” Jack nods, rubbing a hand roughly over his worn face. “I’m giving you five days,” he informs. “Five days for you and Will to leave.”

At the mention of Will, Hannibal’s heart lurches in his chest. Such a foreign sensation, that it momentarily renders him speechless.

“I wonder, what could you be afraid of?”

“Are your old bones tiring from the hunt?” Hannibal jabs to dismiss how his chest tightens until it’s a struggle to maintain steady respires.

“Hardly,” Jack practically growls. “Just giving you a head start.”

“Awfully kind.”

Jack wordlessly rises from the chair at that, just in time for the front door to open again to allow Chiyoh to grace them with her presence. The two of them exchanging an unspoken acknowledgement before Jack smooths the wrinkles from his suit jacket.

“The next time we cross paths, Dr. Lecter, I guarantee it won’t be to fit you in chains,” he threatens in the same tone he once used to thank Hannibal for dinner.

Hannibal smirks, pleased by the man’s unwavering resolve. “You will have to find a replacement bloodhound soon, Jack.”

The arrow hits its intended target as Jack flinches visibly at the reminder of his greatest failure. “I’ll be seeing you, Dr. Lecter,” he says flatly, and hurriedly departs the tiny house without a second look. Chiyoh watching after him intently until the sound of tires crunching over gravel fade into the distance.

Chiyoh crosses the living area to take up the food on the floor beside the chair. Her eyes searching Hannibal’s face for an answer to his unusual display of mercy.

“You did not kill him,” she says at length, her voice laced with frustration. “Is the man who attempted to kill you worth allowing Jack Crawford to keep his life?”

Hannibal swings his legs over the side of the bed. Despising the idea of another minute lying on the lumpy mattress.

“You think he’s being dishonest,” he deduces, intrigued by her apparent outrage at his choice in mate.

“Yes,” she curtly replies.

“Jack is, and has always been, a man of his word—something I greatly admire.” He stands and maneuvers the bag from her grasp. Her thunderous gaze prompting him to assure her, “We have five days.”

“And if we do not locate your…*partner*…in time?” she asks snippily, clearly apprehensive to establish a label.

“There is not much to be gained by delving into the realm of what ifs,” he sidesteps. “Especially, where Will is concerned.”

He feels her eyes burning into his back as he shuffles towards the tiny kitchen.

“I wonder how Mischa feels,” Chiyoh starts, piercingly, “being forced to share your affections.”

Hannibal doesn’t reply. Opting to dig his hands into the bag to take stock of its contents while listening to her retreating footsteps; the heels of her boots loud against wood as she leaves to return to her search of the coast.

With a sigh, he pulls forth the vegetables and is startled when a white envelope falls from its wedged position between the celery stalks. Immediately, he moves to pinch the corners of it between his fingers, and curiously examines its outer casing, finding nothing but his name scribbled across it.

Hannibal

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Freddie Lounds is the epitome of pests that stubbornly plague the world. Yet, once in a while, she proves her usefulness, thus fractionally prolonging her life. Her tabloids consistently keeping precious tabs on Will's activities—allowing him to check in on Will's condition after plunging the linoleum knife into the meat of his belly.

And now, as he observes Freddie as she steps fearfully through the front door of the tiny house with hands raised in surrender, he appreciates his decision to continue to permit her life.

The barrel of Chiyoh's rifle is poised between Freddie's shoulder blades, a clear indication that the polite invitation was not accepted cordially. Freddie ever maintaining her rude mannerisms.

Tasteless.

"Thank you for joining us this evening, Miss Lounds," he starts, a tingle of pleasure crawling along his spine at the horror that passes over her face. "Please sit," he requests with a tone that brooks no room for argument.

She obeys instantly, much to Chiyoh's disappointment. Freddie's trembling visible as he sits opposite to her, disregarding the twinge of pain from his abdomen.

"Please forgive Chiyoh's abrasiveness," Hannibal starts, picking lint from the trousers he borrowed from Will's musty wardrobe. "Trust does not come easy for her, and she is very protective of me."

"I didn't know someone like you needed protection," Freddie fires back, flicking her eyes to glower heatedly at her capturer, who has yet to lower her weapon.

Hannibal releases a soft laugh. "Some would argue that I'm not as infallible as I seem."

“Are you admitting to having a weakness?” Freddie rushes to ask, leaping to that conclusion with impressive intuit. Her skills as a reporter unaffected by fear.

“I didn’t bring you here for an interview, Miss Lounds,” he says coldly as he glimpses the ghost of his beloved standing beside the fireplace. The man’s brows inching upwards in amusement at Hannibal’s carelessness.

Freddie follows his gaze curiously, confusion plain on her face as she searches Hannibal’s for a clue. Possibly optimistic that the answer she hopes to find isn’t the worst case scenario.

“Then, why did you bring me here?” she wonders, gripping the edge of her skirt nervously. “I could go to Jack. Tell him where you’re hiding out.”

It’s an empty threat. A test to see if her death will be quick or protracted.

“No need,” he returns, utterly blasé. “Jack has already visited. It was a shame he left in a hurry; I had hoped to have an old friend for dinner.”

Freddie breathes out heavily, her increasing fear as sweet and cloying as incense on the air. Hannibal’s instincts begging him to indulge in a hunt.

“What do you want?” she asks bravely, pointedly scanning the house for its missing owner. “Where is Will Graham?”

Reaching into his trouser pocket, Hannibal produces a piece of ripped cloth stained with blood. A piece of Will’s shirt the night they slayed the dragon and toppled into the sea. A memento, a torment, and most importantly, an idea as to why Will has disappeared.

“That is precisely what I wish to find out,” he replies, curling the crusty material around his palm. “I want you to write an article.” He pins her beneath an intense stare which causes her shrink in her chair. “Several, in fact.”

“And why would I do that?” she boldly returns, becoming more irksome with each defiant reply.

Hannibal grins, allowing her to momentarily behold the beast she’s only been privileged to see through gory artistry. “I believe you need only one hand to type. The rest of your appendages have no use.”

As predicted, she blanches. Her arms folding over her chest in an unconscious attempt to shield herself, causing Chiyoh to inch closer to prevent an escape.

Will smiles.

“What do you want me to write?” she concedes.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Nine

“I love you,” he says with conviction. It’s conventional, clumsy and foreign on his lips, though no less honest.

Lady Murasaki pauses at the door, her breath hitching at the unexpected confession. Hannibal wants to taste the fear upon her mouth, the longing coating her tongue. He knows she is desperate to give in. Ambivalent to permit herself to be swallowed by the beast—to become whole with his being.

Her hands tremble where they rest at her sides as she pivots to face him. With tears staining her cheeks, her words pierce him to his core: “What is left in you to love?”

A strange lump begins to form his throat. The callous dismissal of his true self enrages him—his world narrowing onto her petite frame, belly swollen beneath her yukata.

“You reject my gift?” he asks, the stirrings of primal hunger washing over him.

Murasaki studies him with a look of comprehension. “Your gift is a mistake,” she says coldly. “I deceived you to my own gains,” she places a hand possessively over her stomach, “those of which I fully intend to take from you.”

Hannibal observes the movement intently, receiving the implications of the deliberate action.

“Freedom and detachment from your maddeningly polite life.” He licks his lips. “A means to an end by use of a bastard child.”

“Precisely.” The moisture in her eyes dries rapidly as her stoicism returns.

He steps forward on light feet, and the sudden movements takes her by surprise. Razor focused on his prey as he backs her swiftly into the nearest wall. She doesn’t attempt to flee, nor defend when he leans into her space; entrapping her in the cage of his arms, a hand grasping the nape of her neck. The caress of her breaths an irritation where it once pleasant.

“It is rude to keep a child from their father, my Lady,” he nearly whispers, allowing it to hang in the fraction of space between their lips. “What’s to be done about that?”

Her lips part, ready to answer, but before she has the chance, the image of her flickers. The features changing rapidly beneath him. Morphing into another, as their surroundings shatter into thousands of fragmented pieces—only to conjoin to form the familiar setting of his kitchen. And standing in her place is a man, breaths hitching as he clutches helplessly at his severed abdomen.

“That place was made for all of us—together,” he tells him, as though scripted, pushing Will until their eyes connect. “I wanted to surprise you,” he confesses, genuinely, before something red hot coils within him at the thoughtfulness gone unappreciated.

“And you,” Hannibal continues. “You wanted to surprise me.”

He releases Will with cool disregard of his injury. Allowing him to feel the pain resonate, the weight of his deceit force him to the ground.

“I let you know me,” Hannibal says bitterly. “See me,” he emphasizes, uncertain if Will grasps the concept of what he granted. “I gave you a rare gift, but you didn’t want it.”

Will falters in his replies, and Hannibal swallows his ire when a voice echoes within the confines of his skull: “Your gift is a mistake.”

He glances towards Abigail; pale, afraid, and understandably confused. How unfortunate that Will has made his decision. If Abigail remained, they would surely abandon him. He would not be made a stepping stone, again.

Beckoning her, Abigail obeys and trustingly steps towards him. Her respires shallow and fast as he curls instantly around her, pinning her to his body as he kisses the scar on her throat with the tip of the linoleum knife. Will’s eyes flash with horror and understanding, his empathy latching onto Hannibal despite his condition—either they are a whole family or nothing at all.

Will does not renounce his intentions.

Hannibal slices through her flesh, eyes upon Will to absorb his grief and loss before dropping her unconcernedly to the floor.

A means to an end.

He senses Chiyoh hovering. Edging the line between safety and potential harm, yet far too curious to think better of it. Hannibal takes great care to pull away from the tableau before him, retreating out the front door of his mind palace with ease to enter the realm of reality once again. Leaving the two of them writhing on the floor.

Opening his eyes, Hannibal takes in the screen of the IPad resting on his lap. Freddie Lounds' articles finally inducing a reaction, as Hannibal predicted they would. The headlines now popping up over the local news like a homing beacon:

STATE TROOPER FOUND DEAD AFTER MISSING FOR DAYS

PEACEFUL TOWN OF DUTTON SHAKEN BY GRUESOME MURDER

NO LEADS IN STATE TROOPER'S DEATH

Hannibal fingers the bloodied cloth as he scans the details for a message he knows will be present. His nose crinkling at the overpowering odor of spice, which nearly drowns Will's natural musk. No doubt done purposely—wishing to convey to Hannibal the power he has lost.

"Will is in Dutton," Hannibal informs, scrolling through the specifics of the woman's untimely demise. A stab wound to her cheek and shoulder, mirroring Will's wounds from their battle with the Dragon.

He catches the slight tilt of Chiyoh's head, who stands reading over his shoulder with a small tray of food in hand. "What makes you certain? It could be coincidence."

"Not with him," he returns plainly, fisting the material. "You know as well as I that he would not be so careless as to have a message appear as such."

With a loud clatter of dishes, Chiyoh slams the tray down onto the nearest surface available to her. The side table close enough to the chair Hannibal occupies, allowing the droplets of tea that sprays outwards to stain his button down, and for the heat of it to seep through the fabric to dampen his skin.

"How do you not see this is a trap?" She gestures wildly. "How can you trust Will is not a part of this?" To further make her point, she says, "Did you not notice Jack Crawford's cooperation?"

Hannibal reverts his gaze from the IPad, now dotted with liquid, to the steel of her eyes. Finding the concern she displays to lack sincerity, no reflection of it upon her semblance. No, he decides, it has never been genuine, but a manipulation. Stealing the opportunity of his vulnerability to make a game with rules he must learn for himself.

Delightful girl.

"He is merely paying back his debt to you," he returns coolly. "I see no reason to suspect anything."

“He delivered you the message,” she argues boldly, testing his patience with her refusal to apologize for the spilt tea. “How can you possibly trust him?”

Hannibal quirks his lips. “You are the only one I trust, my *dovana*.”

“A foolish decision,” she scolds. “Trust only leads to downfall.”

“You misunderstand me,” he returns sharply. “I trust we are like-minded; therefore, I trust in your capabilities. I trust,” he switches off the IPad, “that you will continue to be exactly who you are.”

She shifts uncomfortably, uncertain now of his awareness. “How do you know who I am?”

He indulges her with a warm smile. “You killed my prisoner, because of what was taken from you. I am proud of you.”

Chiyoh takes a moment to absorb the praise, her eyes falling downcast to shield against him. “A woman you had accompany you told me she once believed Will Graham was your greatest mistake.”

“Oh?” Hannibal nudges.

“Her beliefs changed, however, when she met me.”

Hannibal inclines his head a degree in curiosity.

“Will Graham has the unfortunate limitation of a guilty conscious.” She picks up the tray, pointedly observing the liquid pour over the sides of it to splash the hardwood below. “I have no such limitations,” she admits.

“Then, why are you still here, my precious Chiyoh?” he wonders.

Her hands begin to tremble. “We are family, Hannibal,” she states simply, as though it were rehearsed. “You have taught me what that means.”

~*~

Hannibal unpacks the clothes from the scarce amount of boxes among the upstairs bedroom. Most of them holding Will's fishing gear and other interesting trinkets. The fishing attire smelling of mold and river water as he sorts through them for an appropriate size, and understanding by the rough, somewhat grainy texture that they have gone sorely neglected. A sign of a troubled mind when a passion is so easily discarded. An identity crises, he infers—uncertain to which self were real, or perhaps, a symptom to becoming less of one's true self in the wake of the only lifeline being cut.

"You just came here to look at me. Came to get the old scent again." Hannibal pauses deliberately, scanning Will's face for regret. "Why don't you just smell yourself?"

Will recoils. "I expected more of you, Doctor. That routine…an old hat."

He frowns fractionally as he grudgingly selects the largest sizes possible from the pile. Repeating the words in his head and allowing Will's to filter through every pore of his being.

"I expected more of you…"

"I expected more—"

My dear Will, he thinks and presses the repugnant fabric to his lips. Apologetically brushing them against the crusty material. *How had I been so blind?*

"You're supposed to be my paddle."

"I am."

You were unmoored and drifting to sea, my beloved, he thinks. *I should have seen.*

A huffed laugh interjects his musings and the sound grates against every nerve. Hannibal automatically stiffening as he battles the hot poker of irritation that scorches the delicate flesh lining of his person suit. The stitching straining as he fights to rein in his temper, gritting his teeth in a silent snarl. His patience with her thinning.

"Is there a problem, Miss Lounds?" he starts with a tone of warning.

"There are several, but I'm not entirely sure if mine are as paramount," she answers snidely.

He turns at that, a brow raised expectantly. She stares him down from the army cot nailed to the wall opposite him; an ankle bound to the metal framework by a cuff and chain. Though, despite the awkward angle, she manages to sit proper. A semblance of bravery masking the abject terror he knows is crawling beneath her skin.

“Is your life worth so little to you?” he threatens, spying the twitch of her fingers as she suppresses a reaction.

“Is yours?” Freddie parries. “You’re risking repeated capture and a guaranteed dirt nap for the sake of Will Graham.” She smirks, emboldened by the stay of her own execution. “I once asked him what draws you two together. Maybe,” she tilts her head, “I should have directed the question to you.”

“Because I am honest,” he says facetiously, and is delighted when her smugness wavers. Her antics never besting him, though he can admire her tenacity.

“He had a life after you,” Freddie taunts, and her increasing impudence is nearly enough to strangle the words from her throat. A fitting end to someone so keen to have her voice remembered. “A *family*,” she emphasizes. “Who’s to say he wants you to find him?”

“And who is to confirm such a theory?” Hannibal fires back, suspicion arising of who is truly speaking through the meat puppet. An interesting game, indeed, he thinks.

Shifting on the cot, she quickly regains her composure and attempts to strike him where his armor is weakest. “I could tell you how offended he was when I called you ‘murder husbands.’”

Hannibal smiles, then, deeply amused by her clear misinterpretation. For a sheep can never understand a wolf, only that it is prey. “I believe his discontentment was less to do with the label and more to do with the one labeling.”

She scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest in challenge. “If I’m so insufferable, then why haven’t either of you killed me?”

“Perhaps,” he begins, “it’s an ongoing curiosity to see which court the ball will land in next, and what the other plans to do with it.”

He allows her to interpret it on her own. Her skin blanching when realization dawns.

“Chiyoh and I will be journeying into town,” he informs, draping the clothes over his forearm. “Will you be needing anything?”

“No,” she replies far too quickly, a glimmer of hope piercing through the fear within her eyes.

He nods in understanding and swiftly leaves the room. Certain, that she will be gone within minutes of their departure and the next article be written with haste to point authorities in their direction. It will cause the man harboring Will to abandon patience—to rush his plans and become careless.

Hannibal counts on it.

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is greatly appreciated! Thank you for all the comments and kudos and bookmarks.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ten

The town is, as expected, quaint. A small population, which brings automatic suspicion to any newcomer who steps foot within its territory. Even more so now that a beloved townsman has been laid bare and bloody in the very heart of their small world. The town's collective peace of mind forever altered, now fully aware to the evils that plague the Earth—at least, according to their narrow scope of reality. Never seeing the fragile dance of beauty in the many forms life and death have to offer, nor the colorful in-between.

Chiyoh navigates the nondescript SUV she procured from the safe house through roads of interspersed, small businesses and homes. Pulling into the town square where a church towers above it with its holy steeple; much like an ivory castle looking down upon the land. A perfect setting for instilling the fear of a man who views himself God—or close to. The police tape fluttering in a light breeze, contrastingly gentle in the wake of violence.

"Pull into the diner," Hannibal instructs her when they come across a blockade of police vehicles. The officers well into the investigation of one of their own, sweeping the town for any and every shred of evidence—of which Hannibal knows will not be found.

"Leave me here," he commands as she parks in a space far from any officer's line of sight. A flash of disapproval in her eyes upon killing the engine. "Search the area," he continues, "then return here and wait for me."

"And if you are apprehended?" she snaps, clearly in disagreement with his plan of action.

"Such little faith," he comments offhandedly with a soft chuckle. Ruffling his hair before slipping Will's discarded glasses over the bridge of his nose. Discovering them, as he long suspected, to be non-prescription. Merely a shield against a world that covets such a beautiful mind.

Yet, Will eventually removed them to unwittingly welcome Hannibal's intrusion. Absorbing emotion and information with reckless abandon that all but left him as pliable putty in Hannibal's eager hands. Albeit subconsciously, Will desired to see him in all his glory. Desired, despite his nagging sense of morality, to appreciate all aspects of Hannibal's nature.

To seek a darkness that would simultaneously cut him sweetly and stir awake the beast lying dormant within.

"There will be a reckoning."

And how lovely it was.

True to his word, Will aimed his retribution toward him; however, what was initially fueled by Hannibal's careful ministrations and betrayal soon transmuted into a reckoning of broader proportions. Stretching to encompass a world resolving to suppress Will's truer self, and ultimately eliciting a stunning transformation as Will's revenge inched outwards like a spider web of veins; stealthily attaching to the limbs of Will's former puppeteers, and forcing them to dance in turn.

"Hannibal," Chiyoh says, though by her exasperation, it's been repeated several times. "This is where I leave you."

He glances sidelong at her profile, bathed in a focused beam of weak daylight breaking from a blanket of clouds overhead. Appreciating how it contours the softened features of youth while giving sharp relief to the flames of vitality that's violently stripping away the deadened pieces of innocence inside.

Hannibal notes to capture her beneath the sharpened point of a charcoal pencil at some distant opportunity.

"'One cannot know the fate of another with certainty,'" Hannibal repeats her words, grasping the depth of them of which he previously overlooked. "'Unless, they are responsible for it.'"

It draws her attention from a point in the middle distance. Unflinching, even when she bravely meets the eyes of the beast. Her own rising to greet his at long last.

"Your life has always been my responsibility," she confirms.

"And what is to be my fate?" he wonders, reaching to brush a stray strand of hair from the jut of her cheekbone, tucking it smoothly behind the delicate shell of her ear.

Her respires do not quicken at his close proximity. Demonstrating an immunity to his touch she no doubt honed during her years of solitude. "The same as the one bestowed upon me."

Ah, he realizes as she produces a pistol from her thigh holster, aiming it squarely at his chest. *Clever girl.*

"Will my cage be similar to the one I placed you in?" he asks, purposely slowing his movements as he leans away. Careful not to receive another debilitating injury. "Or have you crafted an original—specially made?"

The corner of her mouth quirks slightly. “I found the cage already built; and conveniently, by your hands. I simply need to keep you inside it.”

“Yet, you once declared some beasts should not be caged,” he reminds, collecting the satchel from the floor between his feet. A shame, he thinks, for the balance to shift so quickly. The hunger to witness all she’s become like a physical, gnawing ache.

“I meant for myself.” Her head dips, though not in submission. Her stare sharpening to something feral—lethal.

He rakes his eyes over her, committing to memory this moment to cherish for years to come.

“Tell me,” he begins, “what do you feel standing on the other side of the bars looking in?”

Chiyoh mulls it over for several heartbeats. Her smirk widening, exposing a sharp canine as she confesses:

“Curiosity.”

~*~

“Hello,” the hostess and—based on the small number of staff on duty—waitress welcomes him with a taut smile. She is plain yet lovely, a dark ring wrapping around the base of her throat indicating a difficult home life. “Table for one?”

“Please.” He smiles warmly, radiating calm to ease the tension from her stiff shoulders. Reading the name on her identification tag before she turns away.

An oppressive odor of maple syrup permeates the tiny establishment, thick and cloying. It sticks to the roof of his mouth and floods his nostrils; canceling out all other scents that may be useful in navigating his environment.

Kathy leads him to a corner booth, away from the sparse amount of patrons currently dining with their heads bowed. Leaving a sense of melancholy and loss—a town immersed in grief. To the untrained mind, it seems a courteous move, allowing him a modicum of personal space; however, he recognizes protection against a stranger, the fear of a potential predator. A possessive action to remind him of his place outside their circle of trust.

He graciously accepts the single, laminated sheet serving as a menu, and slides fluidly into the poorly conditioned booth. Glancing over it with a look of interest before ordering, if only to keep up appearances.

The lights of the police cruisers bounce off the wall beside him. It evokes the memory of the night he surrendered to Jack, kneeling on the frozen ground, snowflakes stinging his numbing face. The sacrifice frustrating, yet worth the wait. Will needed the time to sort through his head and truly grasp the repercussions of Hannibal's absence.

"Are you just passing through or are you visiting?" Kathy discourteously asks upon her return, placing what scarcely constitutes a meal onto the table.

"Visiting," he responds immediately, ever affable. "A relative. I was concerned."

There, in her gaze—a droplet of empathy, washing him free from the suspicion she initially harbored. Her eyes turning downcast, hands wringing the apron around her waist.

"I understand." She nods solemnly. "It's been quite a shock to us all."

"I imagine so," Hannibal says with faux sympathy. "Although, a tragedy such as this never fails to remind us not to take for granted those we love."

It prompts the response he's angling for. The line catching, and for once, fully understanding the appeal of fishing.

"May I ask who your relative is?" Kathy asks tentatively; her trust fragile, but gaining exponential strength as the conversation stretches on. Hannibal conceives he will have to soften more in order to dig deeper.

"Surely, they know you're in town and wouldn't leave you to dine by yourself?" she adds, hardly apologetic for prying.

Temporarily adopting Will's awkward mannerisms, he scratches at the nape of his neck and releases a sheepish laugh.

"Unfortunately, no," he admits, purposely allowing a bit of gravy to stain the sleeve of his borrowed jacket as he deliberately fumbles for the water glass. "He's become a bit of a recluse the last few years, you see, so forms of communication are terribly difficult to maintain. He is but a stubborn fool, who wishes no help from anyone." He flicks his eyes up, beseeching. "The name of the town is all I was given."

Recognition alights within the cool verdant tones of her eyes. A fond smile creeping over her face as she says, "You must mean old Doctor Jim?"

“Yes,” he answers swiftly. Amused at the persona the man is taking now. Another clue to lead him in the right direction. “The very same.”

“He’s a regular here,” she divulges willingly, now warmed through the icy exterior enough to surrender such information. “Every morning at eight o’clock on the nose.”

Kathy jabs a thumb in the direction just north of their location, as she scrutinizes the newest customer entering warily. A portly man dressed to the nines, and glowering directly at her. “I know he lives a little ways up from here,” she helpfully provides.

“Thank you,” he says, forgiving her divided attention.

“Well, I would hate to leave you waiting until tomorrow.” She leaves him, then, to partake in the slop on his plate. The apparition of Will, strangely, not appearing to poke at the lengths of which Hannibal is taking to retrieve him.

“My compassion for you is inconvenient, Will.”

Hannibal zeroes in on the argument escalating between the customer and Kathy. Not needing more than a few details to ascertain he is the cause of her bruises. Blaming her for the dent in his car, and barking angrily for her lack of speed in retrieving his lunch—serving to heighten the humiliation.

Hannibal sips the water while looking out into the parking lot to locate said vehicle. Then, sets it down casually to spear the steak on his plate. Grudgingly indulging in the subpar chunk of meat, and ducking his head to hide the grimace as the dry, unseasoned portion hits his palate.

Inconvenient, indeed.

~*~

The scraping of shoe soles against pavement halt within inches of Hannibal as he remains crouched, collecting the spilled items from his satchel scattered along the ground.

“You’re in my way,” comes a gruff voice, followed by a huff of irritation when Hannibal reaches beneath the parked car for a nonexistent item. “Some of us have places to be,” the man grumbles.

Hannibal slings the satchel over his shoulder as he rises gracefully. Straightening to his full height and staring down the pathetic swine.

“My apologies,” Hannibal says, stepping aside to permit the man access to his vehicle.

Taking a cursory glance at their surroundings, Hannibal hastily grips the man’s head in hand as soon as he opens the door, and with a sharp movement, cracks it against the doorframe.

It is effortless as Hannibal hurriedly pushes him into the car, allowing him to fall awkwardly against the passenger side window. Sliding in directly behind him, he snatches the keys from the swine’s limp fingers, then collects the wallet from the tight back pockets of his slacks.

Scanning the ID for the man’s address, he inserts the key into the ignition, and maneuvers the gear stick into reverse.

Chapter End Notes

As always, feedback is appreciated.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> Apologies for another short-ish chapter. We're finally getting to where we need to be in the story. Things will really pick up and progress starting next chapter. Thank you again for all the support and love given.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eleven

Jeremy Klein’s home is, much to Hannibal’s fortune, fairly isolated by the near enclosure of trees and the neighbors located a half mile down the road in either direction. A place fit for events to occur without concern of prying eyes or ears. Which is not entirely unexpected, considering the nature of the lovers’ relationship—familiarity breeding contempt, as they say.

The American colonial architecture offers an illusion of time, despite the building’s glaring youth. Standing proudly against the dull haze of the sky, and welcoming in spite of what it’s permitting to enter.

Hannibal drags the swine through the front door, across the hardwood flooring of the foyer, and around the landing of the stairs, down the hall to a room tucked away in the far corner of the main level. Deducing from his brief tour that this room solely belongs to Jeremy, and therefore holds a treasure of personal information now at his disposal.

He seats Jeremy's pliant body; securing him with zip ties and other assorted restraints to a high backed chair he collected from the dining room. Only pausing when a few rectangular items slip from Jeremy's suit pocket, fluttering carelessly to the floor.

Intrigued, Hannibal snatches them from between the chair legs, and quickly discerns they're tickets to a theater outside town. The last paper he picks up bearing a name and home address with a time of meeting.

With a tsk, Hannibal pockets it while casually tossing the tickets onto the desk behind him. Glimpsing the time on the digital clock beside the desktop computer in the process. The pieces of the puzzle forming a larger image in his mind, bringing Hannibal to ponder if Will would be impressed by his unfailing ability to extemporize at such a precarious time, or continue to think him pretentious.

Hannibal suspects the latter.

Even with Will's presence achingly missing within the rooms of his mind palace, Hannibal's memorized enough of his reactions to make a guess. The absence of his beloved's deadpanned wit already beginning to carve out a cavity in his chest. Dread prodding at an old wound with the notion of Will joining Mischa in the deepest recesses of his subconscious—only accessible whenever either of them deems it necessary.

"I wonder, what could you be afraid of?"

Producing the syringe filled with a cloudy concoction of sedatives, Hannibal pierces the man's forearm with the needle and delivers it into his veins with practiced ease. Assuring himself the man isn't showing signs of a reaction before strolling from the room in direction of the waiting car; teasing the paper in his pocket between two fingers.

~*~

The swine stirs from its slumber; blinking languidly and peering about the room in a daze. His disorientation hardly surprising, given the potency of the sedatives. A heavy dose to allow Hannibal ample time to cement a plan—an achievement in itself with what little he's had to work with.

Hannibal waits patiently. Never so rude to deny his prey a moment to regain its senses; especially, when he needs him coherent for the next step.

"Good morning, Jeremy," Hannibal starts, pleasantly, folding his hands over the glossy, imitation wooden desk. The sides of his palms avoiding the ridges of scratches along its surface; of which, he notes, are many. A sign of uncontrollable rage, even in such a private and calm setting as a home office.

One that hardly impresses, Hannibal might add. Lacking style and organization with scarcely any personal touches.

As mundane as the man, so it seems.

Saliva drips along the curve of Jeremy's chin. His eyes steadily focusing, and brows furrowing once he gradually comes to register himself bound to his own respective chair. The wood creaking while he tests their strength, and panting when he comprehends the situation. Jeremy's gaze skittering from the restraints to Hannibal's face before abruptly falling to scrutinize the briefcase upon his own lap; its lid open to reveal the contents within.

A raspy shout punctures the silence. The man attempting to wrench away from the offending sight, jostling the case enough to topple it from his knees onto the floor. A severed hand landing palm upwards at his feet.

"What the fuck is this?" the swine spits, spraying droplets into the air. Some managing to sprinkle onto the backside of Hannibal's folded hands. "Who the hell are you?"

Hannibal grudgingly stamps down the urge to rip out its tongue as he plucks a Kleenex from the box beside him.

"I appreciate your need for clarification." Hannibal clenches his jaw, and removes the filth from his skin. "However, time is of the essence, and I would rather not waste it on idle prattle."

Jeremy spews curses for lack of anything better to say, his face deepening several shades of red. The legs of the chair scraping against the wood floors beneath him as he wriggles helplessly, leaving evidence of his struggle by uneven rows of scuff marks.

Rising from his seat, Hannibal collects more tissue and rounds the table. Using the Kleenex, Hannibal carefully maneuvers the appendage back inside the briefcase, and latches it shut before affixing it with handcuffs to Jeremy's wrist. Ignoring the sputtering questions and rude demands being fired at him almost without end.

Impassively returning to his side of the desk, Hannibal checks the IPad for any updates from the ever prolific reporter—only to feel a hollow sense of disappointment at the unchanged list

of articles. Pondering if Freddie Lounds remains in Wolf Trap or if her silence betrays an unprecedented move to seek out the authorities.

“Do you *hear me*?”

Hannibal involuntarily tunes back in to his prey’s ranting, catching the tail end of the pig’s pitiful threat: “I bet she’s called the police by n—”

“I assure you, Kathy has not been made aware of your predicament,” Hannibal cuts in unceremoniously, wiggling the mouse to wake the bulky and slightly outdated PC. Noting the snort of disbelief in immediate response.

“And how would you know?” Jeremy challenges. “She had to come home at some point.”

“Someone—” He glances darkly at Jeremy, prompting him to squirm beneath the weight of it. “May have offered advice to temporarily remove herself from an increasingly harmful environment.”

“What…” Jeremy starts weakly, and swallows thickly in order to recover his wits. “*What did you—*”

“I believe she stayed somewhere safe for the night,” Hannibal informs. “She hasn’t bothered to check in with you.”

Jeremy falls silent at that, and Hannibal is certain he observes the cogs slowly turning behind widening, unseeing eyes. Then, as though pricking the balloon to release the tension, Jeremy bursts out into hysterical laughter. Tears collecting in the corners of his eyes from the strain. Studying the briefcase shackled to his person with a small slump of defeat. The metal cuff, no doubt, digging painfully into his flesh.

“It’s her hand, right?” Jeremy chokes out in an interestingly open display of amusement. Deliberately avoiding Kathy’s name to dehumanize her. His face twisting in conveyance of horror a fraction of a second later as he scrambles to salvage his innocent front and label Hannibal more the monster. “It’s *hers*,” he repeats.

Hannibal rejects the instinct to play with effort, and decides to correct him to save on time. The digital clock on the desk reminding him of what precious little is left.

“No.” Restarting the live feed of the person he abducted from the address in the duration of Jeremy’s drug induced sleep, Hannibal swivels the monitor to face him. Gifting him a chance to process what he’s seeing. “It’s his.”

“You’re…not Jeremy.”

“I am not.”

Now strapped to the master bed in the upstairs room of the house, the other man lies there heavily drugged and scarcely conscious; rocking his head side to side in an almost hypnotic rhythm. The bandaged stump of his arm centered perfectly on screen for maximum affect.

“Your lover, is he not?” Hannibal marches on when Jeremy fails to react. And collects more tissues in order to safely produce a framed photo of Jeremy’s lover placing a gentle kiss against the cheek of a woman in uniform from the top drawer; setting it upright for Jeremy to view. “And the fiancé to the deceased State Trooper.” He tuts.

“How did you know about us?” Jeremy accuses sharply, his voice thin and unmistakably frail. “What the hell do you want? Is this revenge for Samantha? Because, I didn’t kill her,” he nearly snarls. “There will be nothing to link me to her death, even if you kill Terrance. They’ll catch you.”

“Do not be so sure,” Hannibal advises. “I am rather thorough and tidy, and you are carrying a piece of him on your person. Possibly, the only piece they will find, and with your DNA beneath the nails.”

Jeremy shakes his head weakly. “No. That’s not—”

“It will be inferred as a scheme, conspired between two lovers ashamed to be acknowledged by the world. Yet…” Hannibal leans forward over the desk, placing weight solely onto his forearms. “Betrayals are often a common side effect with paranoia being the crux of the matter.”

Jeremy considers him silently. More than likely conjuring the images of a grim future.

“This is blackmail,” he guesses, guiltily averting his eyes away from the photograph and the video. “You…won’t kill him, but set us free, and not tell a soul so long as I do something for you?”

“That is the definition of blackmail,” Hannibal patronizes. Mouth twitching at the man’s pursing lips.

“Just tell me what to do,” he concedes quicker than Hannibal predicted. The prospect of condemnation easier to exploit than previously thought, and priding himself with yet another example of his superiority over such undignified blighter.

Hannibal hums, and notes the time nearing the eight o’clock hour. Once again refreshing the webpage on the IPad, and experiences a rush of exhilaration at the anticipated, large-print headline:

MURDER HUSBANDS AT LARGE

“Let’s go for a drive, shall we?” Hannibal suggests cryptically.

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is appreciated.

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

It is a rare occasion Hannibal misses critical details. Usually keen on every minuscule characteristic of his prey in order to calculate their next move. The only exception, of course, being Will, who all but left him breathless at his uncanny ability to hide within his blind spots. Transitioning Hannibal from hunter to prey almost seamlessly, unbeknownst to him.

Now, Hannibal wonders at the cause of his oversights. Rendering him a shell of the hunter he once prided himself to be, and leaving him open to deceit. The memory of Florence resurfacing—of Will's reassuring presence beside him inside the Uffizi. Slipping into conversation effortlessly; the ease of their previous relationship returning with soft smiles and stolen gazes.

The sting of Will's betrayal, thereafter, was more to do with the surprise of it rather than the attempt.

Though, in hindsight, Hannibal wonders if Will would have killed him. Perhaps, Will merely sought to give a gift of mercy as Hannibal did, and to leave his mark upon Hannibal to stake a claim.

Hannibal experiences a sting of regret for Chiyoh's timely intervention.

Yet, he is still unsettled by the unperceived deceit. The unusual willingness to place a level of trust in another, as he's done now. Even with the threat over the swine's head, Hannibal remains uncertain of its actions. And if he's honest with himself, he is unsure of his own, as well. Not for the first time, he knows, since Will's arrival into his life. The man having unearthed a part of him he never realized existed.

"Did you believe you could change me? The way I changed you?"

“I already did.”

The digital time on the dash of the car passes the hour of which ‘Jim’ is said to habitually arrive for breakfast. And the numbers continue to tick by long after the swine is due back from meeting Will. Meaning either he miscalculated Jim’s awareness of his presence or the swine abandoned his lover in favor of his own life.

Gritting his teeth at the police barricade, blocking the northern road to Will, Hannibal reaches for his satchel—only to pause when he spots a corner of paper poking out from beneath the passenger seat. Snatching it quickly, Hannibal examines the familiar card with his second message to Will: *Meet me at the diner*, and followed by its address.

There is a possibility it slipped from the envelope, but Hannibal is not convinced of such a harmless theory. A deliberate sabotage of their reunion is more likely, which might explain Jeremy’s absence and blatant disregard for his lover’s safety.

It is unspeakably rude, Hannibal determines with a snarl, and Jeremy is wise to flee. Though, he will not manage a great distance, not with the incriminating evidence attached to his person.

And if not, Hannibal will see to Jeremy at a later date.

Collecting the satchel, he leaves the car in its spot outside the diner. A rolling crack of thunder sounding overhead, bidding him to glance upward at the rapidly dimming sky. The rays of the sun obstructed by a blanket of storm clouds swirling angrily above. A dense scent of rain heralding the impending storm, and informing Hannibal of what could potentially be a treacherous hike.

Without further ado, Hannibal starts off; edging around the backside of the building with a slow gait, so as to not attract attention. The police still investigating, combing the area again for any overlooked clues, yet missing the outlier skating the perimeter. Which amuses him immensely after enduring years of media frenzy, plastering his name and face upon every social platform.

The devil is a master of disguise.

His boots scrape over roughened asphalt, dotted with potholes and loose gravel that leads him to the tree line. Deadened leaves crunching and rogue twigs snapping underfoot as he steps without hesitation into the brush. Deliberately avoiding the main road, but keeping it within his sights to act as a guide towards Will.

~*~

In the duration of his trek, the sun sets; permitting the dense night to consume the woods. The storm releasing violently as a bolt of lightning slashes across the sky. Icy rain stinging Hannibal's face while he navigates the tricky terrain, stumbling over a myriad of obstacles in his path. His small flashlight, borrowed from Jeremy's home, providing inadequate lighting as he doubles back to the main road; having wandered slightly off course and not wishing to chance losing his way entirely.

Mud cakes his pants up to the shins. The remainder of his clothes laden with water after mere minutes of downpour, sticking uncomfortably to his skin. Still, he presses on against the cutting winds; far too curious if his beloved has reclaimed victory.

"You are obsessed with Will Graham."

Bedelia's words echo in his mind as the road winds along, the border of woodland thinning gradually until it abruptly ends at a small patch of land. A flash of lightning revealing a log cabin nestled almost discretely in a copse of trees, distantly reminding Hannibal of Will's farmhouse in Wolf Trap.

There's an absence of light from the windows, he notes, as he clambers onto the stoop. His hand automatically moving to test the handle of the front door, and somewhat suspicious when it swings inwards without protest. Tensing with anticipation as he waits for any hint of movement at the threshold.

When it appears he is alone, Hannibal cautiously moves inside. Listening for soft sounds to contrast the roar of rain battering the roof and the intermittent cracks of thunder. Sweeping the flashlight over the entirety of the main level, then above to the banister and visible bedroom door. Noting an object on the kitchen island before turning for the stairs.

Carefully distributing his weight to reduce noise, Hannibal climbs to the upper level. His attention drawn immediately to the marginally cracked door at his right before the familiar pungent scent of death hits his senses. Sweet and rancid.

He freezes.

"What could you be afraid of?"

Hannibal swallows thickly. Desperately attempting detach the possible identity of the corpse from Will, and willing the hammering in his chest to calm as he forces himself closer. Gently nudging his way inside to discover a tiny washroom, clouded by the keen scent of rotting flesh. The shower curtain pulled to conceal the tub, indicating the body's whereabouts.

"What could you be afraid of?"

With a trembling hand, Hannibal grasps the edge of the curtain. Hesitating briefly before wrenching it open, allowing light to spill over the lifeless form lying within. The man's

mouth agape, eyes wide and unfocused—a cord wound tightly around the plump flesh of his neck.

Jeremy's neck.

Overcome with relief, Hannibal staggers back until his hip bumps the corner sink. Grounding himself by clutching the chilled porcelain in some measure of support until it strikes him what the presence of Jeremy's body means.

Hannibal hastily returns to the main level to examine what previously caught his eye. Powering on the IPad to find Freddie Lounds' recent article glaring back at him, and resting between their photos, a droplet of blood. The pad of his finger moving to trace it across the screen, smearing crimson over Will's disgruntled countenance.

Where are you?

~*~

The office is blanketed by darkness, save for the area in front of the fire, which pops sparks against the metal mesh. An odd occurrence inside his own mind palace—next to Will's disappearance over the bluff, that is. His curiosity piquing as he crosses the seemingly floorless room; the desk chair remaining turned from its usual position.

As he rounds the desk, he quickly registers the familiar figure lounging awkwardly upon his seat. Curls plastered to the man's brow, beaded with perspiration, and his neck bent uncomfortably to the side. The cast securing his dominant hand puzzling Hannibal as equally as his unexpected appearance.

"Will," he blurts, voice somewhat strained. Yet, Will doesn't stir; unmoving as one of Hannibal's tableaus.

Seized by sudden, compelling fear that this bears truth, Hannibal reaches for Will's wrist. The solidity of it reassuring where the chill of his skin is not. "Will," Hannibal urges. "Come back to me, Will."

At last, Will's eyelids twitch. Rousing with Hannibal's name upon his lips, and quizzical as he scans their surroundings. "Am I…? Is this a dream?"

It is not a response his internal version of Will usually offers. Usually prowling the palace with an air of predatory confidence, as Hannibal favors him.

This Will, however, is disoriented and dubious of his own state of awareness. The abrupt demeanor change striking him with an odd notion that, perhaps, Will is not merely an image in this instance. That, maybe, their connection has finally reached depths beyond immediate consciousness.

Hannibal's lips quirk, pleased, as he moves to stand upright. His hand automatically smoothing over the material of his suit to rid it of any wrinkles.

"Perhaps," he replies, purposely vague, and regards Will curiously. "I believe that depends entirely on your perception."

At Will's visibly mounting bemusement, Hannibal decides to take pity. "It's never been made clear whether or not you have fully grasped the concept of what we share. Therefore, it comes as a surprise that I find you here, now."

"And where would here be, exactly?" Will asks, and Hannibal feels the pain of detachment like it were a physical blow. Pondering for moment if Will might be playing another game or if he truly wishes to disconnect from his own nature as he often strives to do. Either way, this Will is unpalatable and Hannibal will not stand for it.

"You have successfully hidden yourself away, my dear Will," he chides. "So far out of reach that I almost could not locate you, even within our shared spaces." Hannibal turns from his beloved to gaze into the fire.

Will's voice cracks, vulnerable and sincere, "I was worried you were dead."

Hannibal's breath catches. The echo of his own confession elicits an ache deep within him. Evoking memories of a simpler days, where such words could be spoken freely and, for the first time since his affair with Lady Murasaki, honestly. However, it sounds woefully contradictory slipping out from between Will's teeth.

Their conversation progresses from there, and Hannibal observes his beloved surfacing through the fog of confusion with each new revelation. Will's eyes piercing him to his core, daring him to contend with his insights.

"It was an honor, my dear Will. A sacrifice requires some form of disinclination," Hannibal gently corrects when Will misunderstands his intentions before their fateful plunge into the sea.

"Which is why you pointed out the erosion of the bluff; manipulated a win for us both," Will realizes, at last; grasping the roots of Hannibal's devotion.

"Have we not always sought that result?" he prompts, wistful.

A sequence of barks tear through the room, curtailing the long awaited answer as Will's attention is irritatingly broken.

“Benny?” Will starts with a gasp, scrambling to his feet, eyes desperately searching the darkened end of the room for signs of the animal. That, of which, Hannibal determines is not one of the pack from Wolf Trap, but somewhere outside.

He moves to stand at Will’s back, staring over his shoulder with equal anticipation. “You know this dog?”

“Yes.”

Hannibal hums, intrigued, and swiftly departs his mind palace. Returning to where he stands at the kitchen island, remaining unchanged since he entered.

Pivoting on his heel, Hannibal exits the cabin; listening intently from beneath the shelter of the awning for another round of barks. And homing in on the sound as it filters through the storm’s unrelenting roar, his feet already carrying him down a footpath in the animal’s apparent direction.

Through some undergrowth between two trees, Hannibal’s spots a patch of wet, gold fur. The dog seemingly uncertain as it paces a small area, and clearly injured by the significant limp to its gait. Its whines of distress constant, cutting through the thick of the woods.

He whistles and the dog whirls around, scanning for the source. Then, once seen, limps with complete disregard of its own safety straight for Hannibal.

With head dipped low and tail tucked between hind legs, Benny warily approaches while favoring its front, left leg. The fur around it matted with blood from a recent wound it’s sustained mixed with streaks of mud.

“Hello,” Hannibal greets, pitching his voice softer as Will does with his strays, and bends slowly to allow it a friendly sniff of his hand. “Where is Will?” he asks.

Cocking its head, Benny noses the cuff of his jacket before abruptly moving away. Releasing a single bark as it slowly backtracks to where it currently lingered; glancing over its shoulder in indication to follow.

Hannibal doesn’t question the dog’s comprehension, and trails after it while keeping vigilance on the surrounding woods. Halting only when Benny commences pawing at the ground, despite the injury. A whine of distress ratcheting up in volume when its struggles produce no apparent result.

Kneeling at its side, Hannibal sweeps the flashlight over the area of interest. Discovering the groove of earth where a metal door’s been fitted. More than likely leading to an underground chamber of sorts, Hannibal suspects with a small smile. Appreciating the theatrics as he brushes a hand through the accumulated rain water until he spies the handle.

It seems we are both set in our ways, he thinks, fondly, and yanks the hatch open.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirteen

Rushing water roars in the enclosed space, reminiscent of the churning sea the night of their fateful plunge. Increasing in its intensity the further Hannibal steps down the long stretch of stone walled tunnel—of which does not force him into a crouch.

Though underground, he feels a significant draft tickling icily across his face. The scent of salt water wafting through a metallic door at the far end; left ajar as though he were expected.

“How can you not see this is a trap?”

“How can you trust Will is not a part of this?”

Moving to press his backside against the wall, he carefully nudges it open with the barest tips of his fingers. Allowing the hinges to bare most of the burden; steadily swinging open with a squeak that’s immediately lost to the clamor the door had scarcely muffled.

Similar to the cabin, there is no hint of an ambush. No shadow playing upon the door from the weak light cast upon it, nor any notable footfalls. Hannibal glances behind him instinctively, but again sees nothing but darkness.

Digging into the satchel, Hannibal removes the pistol he borrowed from the desk drawer from Wolf Trap. Pleased to have discovered it safely kept as a token of Will's beginning transformation. Albeit an impersonal choice of weapon, Hannibal cannot deny the feeling of pride the weight of it in his palm evokes.

Slowly, Hannibal turns the corner to absorb the sight of an empty dungeon with a single lantern placed on the ground to poorly illuminate its surroundings. Its odd placement drawing Hannibal closer, willing him to see what is intended.

It guides him to an edge overlooking a large pit filling rapidly with dark water. The lantern's light glittering across the surface, taunting him with its hidden knowledge of what lies in its murky depths. That is until he spies an old blood stained piece of cloth he previously overlooked. A shirt folded neatly and placed beneath the lantern.

"Have I gone to a place you can't follow?"

Hannibal's world narrows, the rest falling from his awareness. Seconds seeming protracted, unnecessarily long. The air itself dense and difficult to take in.

A young girl screams inside his mind.

Some distant part of him recognizes the frigid temperature of the water as he hits it, but feels impartial to its affects. The small flashlight, which proved durable in the pouring rain, now withholding beneath the water as he sweeps it in a frantic search.

Until at last it spots him; face serene as it is in slumber, mouth partially open, and curls waving angelically in the current.

Will.

Despite his numbing limbs and the burning lungs, Hannibal pushes himself downwards. Reaching outwards for one of the bonds around Will's wrist and tugs.

It holds sturdy.

His vision flashes white momentarily. Choking down what he infers for the first time as genuine terror.

Without a second thought, he grasps Will's hand, dislocating the thumb and slipping the extremity free of its restraint. Then moves swiftly to the other—only to have something constrict painfully in chest at the dismaying sight of the hard cast looped around the thumb.

Surfacing quickly, Hannibal intakes a desperate breath and dives under once more. Gripping the flashlight between his teeth, he examines the cuff closely for any weakness. Noting through bleary vision how the latch isn't entirely secure—no doubt due to the bulk of the cast—and quickly commences to yank. Placing his foot against the brick to gain leverage.

The latch is stubborn, despite his strength, so he resolves to switch tactics and re-positions; angling a kick upwards. It springs open with a loud metallic snap that's amplified by the water. Releasing Will to float aimlessly away.

Hannibal wastes no further time, immediately collecting Will in his arms and rising to what he can only consider relative safety above. Sputtering as they breach, but not lingering in the tide for long as he pulls Will to the nearly level platform, heaving him up onto it.

Will doesn't react when Hannibal kneels beside him. A clear and disconcerting sign he's been under a dangerously amount of time. Prompting Hannibal to press trembling fingers to the artery in Will's neck, and having a fleeting sense of relief once he counts a sluggish pulse.

He commences chest compressions without delay. Willing life into his beloved with every breath into his slack mouth until Will gasps shallowly, followed by a wrenching cough. The man expelling an acrid mixture of sea water and vomit as Hannibal hurriedly turns him onto his side. Arranging him in the recovery position as he murmurs encouragement, stroking the wet curls plastered against Will's profile.

The cock of a gun sounding from directly behind is unmistakable. Done purposely to elicit a sense of helplessness with the satchel and Will's gun out of reach; though, it lacks the desired effect. "Hello, Uncle Robert."

"It is nice to have the FBI deliver you to me. Mr. Crawford was more than willing to do so, if it meant you'd be dead." The man's voice is nearly lost to the ceaseless rushing water. "It is good to see you again, Hannibal."

Will continues to battle for breath. His unconscious state more than troubling, but unfortunately placed second in terms of priority.

"You have seen me," Hannibal corrects. "All this time."

"That is true," Robert admits, and Hannibal follows the direction of the man's footsteps as he steadily approaches. "However, it has always been your backside." He pauses. "As it is now."

Hannibal wheezes a chuckle, amused by such coincidences. "More than you deserve, I think."

"Don't test me," the man warns. "I lack the patience I once had in my youth."

"We are not here for the purpose of pleasant conversation," Hannibal reminds. "Exhibiting patience defeats such purposes."

"And is an act beyond both of our restraints," the man tacks on, daring another few inches, and causing Hannibal to relinquish Will. Laying him gently and running the pad of his thumb across Will's bottom lip.

"Tell me," the man starts, "was that little Chiyoh I saw prowling around the cabin?"

Hannibal slowly stands. Eying the level of the rising water that's now threatening to bubble over as he muses Chiyoh's possible actions subsequent to her departure. "Yes."

"My, my." Robert laughs heartily. "She looks quite like her mother, doesn't she? Nothing at all like her ill-begotten father."

“A spitting image,” Hannibal agrees, casting the man a warning glance over his shoulder at the personal slight.

“Yes.” The man clears his throat. “I suppose it’ll prove some difficulty when ending her life. I did favor you, for a time.”

“Yet, you experienced none while ending her mother’s, whom you also favored,” Hannibal reminds coldly as he rises to stand; turning with a glower. “An awfully callous act against a wife.”

Robert sneers. “Such hypocrisy coming from you.”

Hannibal fires back, “Unlike yourself, I take care of what is mine.”

“So, you devoured my son to avenge her so-called good name?” Robert returns coolly. A practiced justification, if Hannibal has ever heard one. “You were hardly the person to cast the first stone, my dear nephew.”

“More an eye for an eye.” Hannibal’s lips quirk as an emotion of a darker nature passes across his uncle’s aged features. “However,” he continues, mirroring the movements of his uncle as he begins to circle, “it now seems unbalanced.”

Robert raises the pistol to aim in-between Hannibal’s eyes. “Do not pretend you were not plotting my demise as well, dear nephew. To take my place with my Murasaki at your side.”

“I would not dream of lying to you, Uncle,” he repeats the words of his youth venomously.

“Good.” The pistol abruptly swings abruptly towards Will’s crumpled form, eliciting a flash of memory.

“Had you known what they planned to do with her, would you have killed them?” Bedelia wonders, brushing a stray hair from her cheek.

“Yes.”

“Would you have allowed them to kill you to save her?”

Hannibal considers such a notion for merely a heartbeat. “Yes.”

“So, you are capable of emotion, then.”

Hannibal’s beast releases a snarl as the world abruptly narrows, barreling forward with little thought to the consequence. The gunfire deafening as he grips hold of the man’s wrist and wrenches it upwards; chips of stone raining down upon them.

Robert demonstrates a youthful dexterity as he twists, heaving Hannibal over his back with ease. The impact with the stone wall stealing Hannibal’s breath momentarily before hitting the dirt floor with a roll, swiping his boot out to catch Robert’s knee. Relishing the cry of pain as he snaps the joint out of place; his prey stumbling backwards to the edge of the pit while he fluidly regains his footing.

It is a brief retreat, however, as Robert unexpectedly rushes him without care to his injury. Clearly intending a blow to the head with the pistol as his arm swings bluntly. Hannibal dodging it easily; stepping in the opposite direction of the attack and looping an arm around Robert's throat and gripping his hand to steady the gun.

The man chokes unattractively, his consciousness fading. It's not enough of a satisfying ending for such swine, Hannibal thinks, but decides it will do. Considering Will's present condition and the thin trail of water inching across the ground.

A sharp pain erupts suddenly at his side, lancing upwards and causing the muscles in his arms to weaken. His prey slipping from his hold with a gasp, then wrenching the knife free in the process, but not without a vengeful twist beforehand.

White spots dot Hannibal's vision, sluggishly discerning an organ has been pierced. Pressing his palm to the wound out of instinct prior to the sole of a boot at his midsection, which propels him over the edge and back into the pit. The shock enough to temporarily render him motionless without the driving aid of adrenaline.

"I'm your friend, Will. I don't care about the lives you save. I care about your life."

Hannibal jolts to his senses and hurriedly rises to the surface once more—only to be greeted by the barrel of the gun trained at his face as he treads water.

Robert tuts in disapproval, waving the small knife in taunt. "You underestimate me. Or, perhaps, you've grown sentimental."

The wound stings from the immersion of salt water, as though an emphasis for his inevitable undoing. "Any sentiment harbored is not for you."

The man nods curtly in mutual understanding. "Although I intended a slow death, it seems my time has run short." He indicates with the point of his blade the water spilling over the edge in earnest. "And I desire to ascertain that you are, as they say, good and gone before I move on to greener pastures."

Hannibal hardly reacts as he catches the hint of a shadow moving against the back wall. "Wherever you move on to, I assure you it will not be green."

Passing confusion dances across the man's face before it contorts to surprise as his head is yanked, teeth of the assailant piercing the skin at his artery and tearing the meat free. Blood spraying in a beautiful arc to mix with the sea in sacrificial offering. Robert's body collapsing beside Hannibal with a splash, prompting him to shove him deeper. Familiar hands joining him to prevent the now thrashing prey another precious breath.

Robert stills, and Hannibal releases the body in favor of the man kneeling at in the rushing waters. His features a canvas painted exquisitely with the blood of his prey. A hunter in triumph as his gaze pins Hannibal in place, the beast within acknowledging its mate.

Heedless to their current situation, Hannibal launches himself upwards onto the platform. Tangling his fingers instantly in the wet curls of his beloved to pull him roughly until their

lips collide. Their meeting rough, teeth scraping over skin—the metallic taste of death upon Will's tongue, invigorating.

Will separates them with reluctance, aware their window of escape is quickly coming to a close. "We need to get out of here."

"Yes."

They scramble to their feet. Will bearing his weight as they wade towards the inner door. The chamber falling into darkness as the lantern submerges.

Barking echoes as they pass into the tunnel, drawing them closer to the exterior doors. A sigh of relief sounding at his side as Will realizes his companion is all but well. His reaction oddly filling Hannibal with a similar sensation as he mentally notes owing the loyal canine a debt of his gratitude.

The storm has yet to subside as they clamber to higher ground. Silently agreeing to head in direction of the cabin for shelter with Benny trailing along behind them.

Entering the cabin, Will immediately guides Hannibal to the sofa, placing him upon it with a gentleness Hannibal has yet to earn. Benny seemingly spent; not willing to follow after her guardian as Will disappears briefly. Returning with a lit candle and medical kit from some unknown location inside.

Will scans him with his eyes, the candle trembling in his grasp. Still weak from nearly drowning and daunted by his lack of skills to perform the imminent procedure.

"I will instruct you," Hannibal assures.

The man blinks, as though Hannibal's voice has cut through the haze of dissociation. "You could've let me die. Saved yourself."

Hannibal swallows thickly, catching the double meaning. Wondering when the value of Will's life became equal to his own. "I could have."

"But you didn't," Will states the obvious.

"No," Hannibal concurs.

"Why?"

Hannibal absorbs the question for a minute. "Why didn't you?" he asks instead.

Something indistinguishable alights Will's eyes, then his beloved moves to perch himself at the edge. Setting the candle onto the side table with an intention to stall.

"Will," Hannibal nudges, craving to hear his response.

"We can't stay here for long," Will dodges, flipping open the kit with consternation. "What's our plan?"

Hannibal grudgingly accepts Will’s deflection, for now. Filing away the conversation for a later date.

“I could show you Florence.” Hannibal coughs feebly, the onsets of shock overcoming him. “This time in its true glory.”

Will chuckles sourly and produces a surgical knife, casting him a sidelong look. “I think I’ve had enough of Europe to last me a lifetime.”

“Very well,” Hannibal agrees, his words beginning to slur. “Where…do you wish to…go?”

Shoving his wet clothes from the wound, Will traces it curiously with the tip of the knife. “Somewhere warm and tropical.” He glances concernedly towards Benny, who whines quietly in pain.

“I will see…to her after you are finished,” Hannibal says. “She is more than welcome to accompany… us.”

“You really must be close to death.” Will waits patiently as Hannibal draws a shaky line across his abdomen with the tip of his forefinger, outlining the area of incision. “I think I like you this way.”

And with that revelation, Will slices into the meat of his belly.

Hannibal’s soul all but singing in delight.

Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE, IT'S ROBERT LECTER!

I apologize for this taking so long. I've been really nervous about ending this; hoping that I'll live up to everyone's expectations. I wrote and re-wrote this chapter at least half a dozen times to get it just right. Thank you so much to everyone's patience and to all the comments, kudos, and bookmarks I received! It really helped me to complete this work. Next chapter (14) is a preview to part 2 of this small series, if anyone is interested. Thank you again to all the readers out there! I hope this was a great ride!

Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

Sequel Sneak Peek

“Hello, Miss Starling.”

To her credit, Clarice hardly starts at the sudden address, save for a sharp glance upward from her book. Her countenance inscrutable, eyes concealed behind dark shades, and lips tautening to form a stern frown. Though, despite her best efforts to remain unreadable, he knows he’s surprised her. Any warning she may have received gone unheeded from an unquellable curiosity to test their credibility.

Folding a leg over his knee, he settles more comfortably in the chair. Offering her a small, sympathetic smile while tracing a finger over the rim of his own coffee mug on the table between them. The warm breeze carrying a haunting scent of salt water as it ruffles the leaves of the palm trees around them.

“Didn’t expect me?” he prompts when it’s evident she remains uncertain how to proceed. More from inexperience than fear, he notes, simply by the way she straightens her posture.

“No,” she admits, and he’s taken aback minutely at the honesty. Vulnerability being highly discouraged in such a field of work. “I thought I’d have to pass the barricade that is Doctor Lecter before I managed to meet with you.”

Will makes a noncommittal noise, lifting his cup to his lips to indulge in Cuba’s finest brew. “A monolith would be more apt.”

Clarice glances about with the subtlety of a hunted deer, but ultimately stands her ground. “He’s very possessive of you.” Will snorts indelicately in agreement. “I’m actually surprised you’re here, alone.”

“I wouldn’t presume too much,” he warns, inclining his head in vague gesture of their public location. “We’re practically joined at the hip, as they say.”

Her frown deepens. “How did you know I was here looking for you?”

“Jack is fairly predictable,” Will sidesteps with ease, willing to divert her suspicions towards someone more deserving. “The old dog that can’t learn new tricks.”

She flinches at the insult, clearly still viewing the man in high regard.

“He asked me not to find you,” she sees fit to correct him, and it only serves to irk Will. Sensing special treatment has colored her perspective, as it once did his.

“And yet, you found me.” Will smiles darkly, envisioning the familiar collar Jack is clasping around her neck.

You never learn, do you Jack?

She shifts in her seat, finally casting away the façade of casual tourist as she bends for her suitcase placed at her feet. Pulling a folder from within the front pocket and placing it pointedly in the center of the table—well within his reach.

He returns the challenge with a heated glare, only to meet his own reflection in the lenses of her glasses. For once frustrated to be blocked from crucial eye contact. “You realize what this means for your career?” he starts, bristling. “Are you willing to stake it all on me?”

Pursing her lips in thought, she tilts her head and decidedly reminds him, “You once swore to catch monsters; and you did, quite efficiently.”

Flattery is hardly becoming, and it nearly has him disinterested in Jack’s new game. “Takes one to know one,” he returns glibly.

“You don’t have to be one,” she strives for compassion. Laboring under the assumption that he merely lost his way by compelling outside influences. “This could be a way to redeem yourself.”

Will nurses his coffee wordlessly, and drops his gaze to the file with a growing expression of interest. Though, it isn’t for what contents lie within, nor the unwanted redemption promised. But something far more personal—*bloody*—and easily accessible, if he plays his cards accordingly.

Closure that he deserves, but long since been denied.

“You have to create a reality where only you and the fish exist,” Will says sagely. “Where your lure becomes what he wants most, despite everything he knows.”

“Wrong move and he swims away,” Jack tacks on, eying Will evenly.

“I’m a good fisherman, Jack.”

Will’s lips twitch.

No wrong moves or you might swim away. Right, Jack?

Clarice is studying him intensely. Will can practically feel her eyes roving over him, absorbing every minute detail and, undoubtedly, dissecting every tick with the use of memorized textbook notations. Distantly reminding him of a woman he once shared deeper affection for, whom stepped in-between him and Hannibal to act as gatekeeper.

“I think there’s still something good left in you, Mr. Graham,” Clarice remains determined to appeal to his better nature. “Your ex-wife also thinks so.”

Will blinks, somewhat stunned to hear of Molly in so many years, and irritated to have her leveraged against him now. However, if he is to continue on with the plan brewing in his mind, he may as well allow it.

“Give me until tomorrow,” he asks reasonably, accepting the file and sliding it towards him. “I’m sure Hannibal will also be intrigued, given the importance of my involvement.”

She doesn’t react to the inclusion of Hannibal—evidently expecting it. Yet, there is a hint of skepticism in her voice as she wonders, “How do I know either of you will be honest with me?”

“Between the two of us, we always will be,” he assures, and hears an echo of Hannibal’s amused chuckle in his mind palace when she catches on:

“One head lies and the other tells the truth?”

Will hums, finishing the remainder of his drink, then considers the porcelain cup with an arising need to let it fall and shatter.

“Best to listen with both ears,” he warns.

Clarice has the presence of mind not to push her luck. Still skittish and wary as she rises from her seat. “I’ll be here tomorrow at noon,” she states, leaving no room for debate.

“Until tomorrow.” Will studies her intently as she scoops up her luggage and departs down the main road. Fingering the envelope thoughtfully while she vanishes around a corner tourist shop.

“How rude of Jack,” Will says with a sigh, hearing the familiar chuckle respond behind him. Watching out of his peripherals as the man sitting at the table a few feet away shifts to remove a few pesos from his pocket before standing. The dog at his side excitedly scrambling to her feet.

“And what should be done about that?” Hannibal asks with no small amount of curiosity. Fluidly stealing her vacant chair, and crossing a leg over the other. His beige three piece complementing him as much as it stands in contrast of the backdrop of colorful tourist attire —the matching fedora, Will determines, a ridiculous addition.

“Whenever feasible, one must eat them,” Will replies, placing the mug atop the files. “As you always say.”

Hannibal’s delight gleams in the depths of his gaze, then darkens hungrily in approval. “Uncle Jack seems to have a knack for ruining special occasions.”

“Weddings being one of them,” Will returns sharply, glancing toward the shoreline just beyond Hannibal’s shoulder. The archway breaking the view and decorated to the specifications given. Noting how Hannibal, for once, respected his desire for simplicity. “Do you consider the day ruined?”

“Not today; no,” Hannibal reassures, but Will senses a partial truth. “It does, however, put a damper on what I had planned for you. It will have to wait.”

Releasing a harsh, bitter laugh, Will taps the file absentmindedly with his fingertips. “What else is new when it comes to Jack?” He grits his teeth. “The world revolves around him.”

A warm hand suddenly captures his own, halting his movements and drawing his attention back to Hannibal. Whose features soften to convey a fondness mostly reserved for times alone as teeth scrape against the skin of Will’s knuckles.

“Not for much longer,” Hannibal promises with a tender kiss to the irritated flesh.

“I’ll be arrested,” Will states, matter-of-fact. “And I’ll have to play my part convincingly.”

A smile sharply cuts across Hannibal’s face. “Uncle Jack’s knowledge of your manipulative, pathological tendencies will prove difficult to maneuver around.”

Tongue darting out to lick at the dryness of his bottom lip, Will responds softly, “It’ll just take one bite, Hannibal. One curious nibble.” Catching Hannibal’s gaze, Will holds it firmly. “The smallest doubt.”

“As always, *mylimasis*,” Hannibal returns, sinking teeth into the back of Will’s hand until a hiss of pain escapes from between Will’s lips; the skin breaking easily. “I have faith in you,” he finishes with a glide of his tongue across the wound.

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